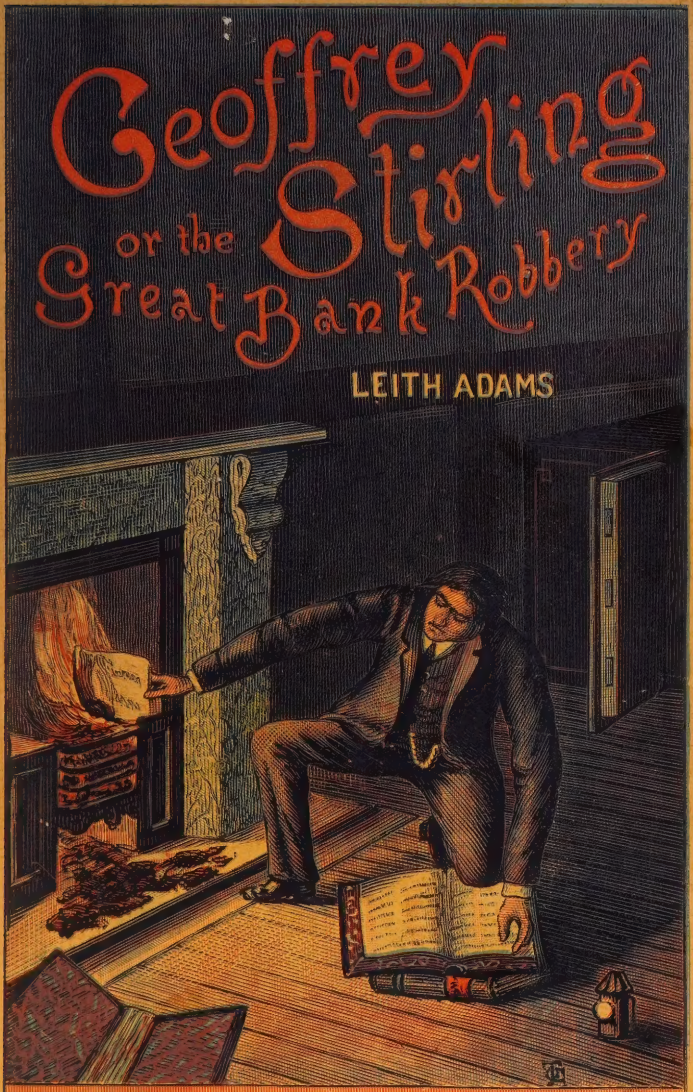
PRICE TWO SHILLINGS

Geoffrey Stirling

or the Great Bank Robbery

LEITH ADAMS



LONDON · SWAN SONNENSCHEIN · & · COMPANY

1/-

Mrs Leith-Adams is now Mrs De Courcy Laffan. This novel appeared in 1883. It has been dramatised.

RB75853

Library

of the

University of Toronto

GEOFFREY STIRLING.

WORKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

MADELON LEMOINE. New edition, one volume.

"Mrs. Leith-Adams is gaining a conspicuous place among the very few novelists—among those of her own sex lamentably few—who reach popularity by aiming at something a great deal better and higher. *Novels like the present are rare, in which the story-teller, instead of only caring to meet the public taste or fashion more than half-way, is obviously intent only upon attracting readers to her by giving them the very best and highest that she has to give them.*"—*Globe.*

COSMO GORDON. 3 vols.

"In one all-important respect Mrs. Adams stands nearly alone among women writers. She knows how to write a love story without mistaking flirtation for passion."—*Globe.*

LADY DEANE; and other Stories. 3 vols.

"The stories, as are all of Mrs. Leith-Adams' literary efforts, are pure in tone, and very acceptable literature for our wives and daughters in consequence.—*Whitehall Review.*

"A story full of delicate and graceful touches."—*Globe.*

MY BROTHER SOL; and other Stories. 3 vols.

"The first volume is occupied by one of the most delightful sketches of child-life it has been our fortune to read."—*Land and Water.*

MY LAND OF BEULAH. 3 vols.

"This story bears throughout many evidences of exceptional talent."—*Morning Post.*

WINSTOWE. 3 vols.

"'Winstowe' is a charming picture of English country life."—*Boston Transcript.*

AUNT HEPSY'S FOUNDLING. 5th edition, one vol.

"Mrs. Leith-Adams' story, 'Aunt Hepsy's Foundling,' strikes us as admirable. There is exquisite poetry in the charming descriptions of nature which it contains."—*The Times.*

"An almost perfect novel of its kind."—*Saturday Review.*

LOUIS DRAYCOTT: The Story of His Life. 2 vols.

CICELY DENNISON'S LOVE STORY.

A SONG OF JUBILEE, and other Poems. 3*s.* 6*d.*
Kegan Paul & Co.

"This volume has throughout a fine musical ring; the cadences are sweet. Nor is it the music alone which pleases: the thoughts are pure, genuine, and sincere, and they are restrained by the exercise of a refined taste. The book is beautifully printed."—*Birmingham Daily Post.*

GEOFFREY STIRLING;

OR,

THE GREAT BANK ROBBERY.

BY

MRS. LEITH-ADAMS

(MRS. LAFFAN),

AUTHOR OF "AUNT HEPSY'S FOUNDLING," "MADELON LEMOINE," ETC.

"The evil that men do lives after them."—JULIUS CÆSAR.

NEW EDITION.

COMPLETE IN ONE VOLUME.

LONDON:

SWAN SONNENSCHEIN & CO.,

PATERNOSTER SQUARE.

[*All Rights Reserved.*]

Printed by Hazell, Watson, & Viney, Ld., London and Aylesbury.

PREFACE.

In presenting a new edition of this book before the public, I should like to make some allusion to the many letters I have received from people quite unknown to me, asking to be told the authorship of the exquisite love-poem quoted from in so many pages of my story. It is by the late Charles Dickens, and may be found in an operetta written by him, entitled "The Village Coquettes."

BERTHA LAFFAN.

To

MY DEAR SON

FRANCIS WILLIAM LAUDERDALE ADAMS

AND HIS WIFE

EDYTH

CONTENTS.

BOOK FIRST.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	THE GREY DAWN	9
II.	RUIN UPON RUIN. ROUT ON ROUT	20
III.	AN APPEAL	32
IV.	THE ANGEL ON THE THRESHOLD	48
V.	A LOVE SONG	64
VI.	HER WEARY QUEST	77
VII.	MRS. BUNNYCASTLE'S LANDLORD	91
VIII.	THE WIDOW'S CURSE	103

BOOK SECOND.

IX.	THE BOY DAVIE	116
X.	THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH	127
XI.	YIELDING PLACE TO NEW	136
XII.	FORTUNE'S WHEEL	147
XIII.	HAUNTED	159
XIV.	FAR ABOVE RUBIES	171
XV.	IN THE TOILS	182
XVI.	DAVIE'S TASK	193

CHAP. PAGE
XVII. HUNTED DOWN 205
XVIII. DEATH'S COUNTERFEIT 214
XIX. HESTER'S GOOD WORK 225
XX. NEMESIS 233
XXI. FOILED 246

BOOK THIRD.

XXII. MRS. CALLENDER ENTERTAINS . . . 260
XXIII. A PEAL OF BELLS 272
XXIV. THE SUMMER OF THE HEART . . . 284
XXV. AN OLD SONG 293
XXVI. THE SHADOW 304
XXVII. THE ACCUSATION 313
XXVIII. DAVIE IS SILENT 320
XXIX. DAVIE SPEAKS 332
XXX. NURSE PRETTYMAN 342
XXXI. I NEVER LOVED HIM TRULY—UNTIL NOW . 354
XXXII. IN CONCLAVE 362
XXXIII. "AFTER LIFE'S FITFUL FEVER . . . " . . 370
XXXIV. "SHE SLEEPS WELL" 375
XXXV. JAKE'S WATCH AND CHAIN 379
XXXVI. A HAPPY EXILE 386
XXXVII. AT THE SAFE RETREAT 390
XXXVIII. FAREWELL 395

GEOFFREY STIRLING.

BOOK FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

THE GREY DAWN.

THE present century was in its thirties.

Life in those days seems like a far-off time, but more from the vast expanse of human progress that lies betwen then and now than from actual lapse of years.

Electricity—that marvellous agency by which in these days knowledge flashes from one portion of the globe to another, more swiftly than light itself—had but just awakened at the touch of science, and was hovering upon the threshold of a career of activity at once beautiful and terrible.

Since the knowledge of passing events could not "run to and fro in the earth" as now, people were content to dwell longer and more closely upon this or that marvel; nor did wonders of all kinds and incidents of every colour jostle each other, a motley crowd, to gain the public ear, like a crush at a ticket-seller's window where each is ardent to be first, and none willing to be last.

The century was in its thirties—well on in them.

The year was in its wane; but only as a fruit that is over-ripe may be said to be so; failing rather from excess

of maturity than from any sign of decay. Not only was the year in its wane, but the night too—the early autumn night, whose crown of stars began to shine a little faintly.

The hour had come which is rather the death of the night than the birth of the day; which partakes of both life and death, and is wholly neither.

Though the town of Becklington and its surrounding country still lay lapped in silence, one voice there was that sang unceasingly, yet sang so soft and sweet and low that it rather added to the slumberous nature of things than otherwise, as might a mother's lullaby over a sleeping child. This was the fall and murmur of a river that took its rise in the far-off hills, and found its outlet to the sea through a network of deep watercourses, taking here and there a twist or turn so quaint and unexpected that you were ready to fancy the foolish stream must have repented leaving the quiet upland haunts that had seen its birth, and was trying to make its way back again, scared by the rush and noise of the sea which lay some way ahead, and the busy life of the town.

One of these tributary branches was broader than th rest, and standing at equal distances along its banks, sentinel-wise, were pollards, each with its shadow sleeping at its feet; stirring with the faint ripple of a tide just on the turn, and with the stirring of their actual selves in the breath of a faint chill breeze that came up from the coast, gently buffeting the drowsy heads of the flowers, as a hint that it would soon be time to be up and ready to greet the day.

The face of the water everywhere began to give back the faint grey light. The streets and buildings of the town showed grey with closely-curtained windows. Never a figure was yet astir, though from the stables here and there came a sound that told of horses shaking their head-stalls, and moving lazily among their straw as conscious that the day's work was not far off.

Becklington was an irregularly built but picturesque town with a central gathering of streets and squares clustered about an ancient market-place, and arms of newer buildings stretching down towards the sea, that showed as a blue line beyond the many mouths of the river. In the midst of what was called the Meadows, a broad expanse of

grass-land dotted with clumps of trees, stood the old square-towered church. In the midst of the market-place was the Market-Cross, moss-grown and venerable, round which on market-day innumerable bargains were made with much chatter, and frequent disputations of a complicated nature.

This cross was said to have been brought to Becklington during the time of the Plague, and was looked upon in the light of a talisman, garlands of leaves being hung upon it during hay-carrying, to ensure a continuance of fine weather.

Market-day at Becklington was a very busy and exciting time, few such occasions passing without some frightened stirk or obstinate pig becoming unmanageable, and having a mind to investigate the contents of one or other of the shops which abutted on the mart. Besides these casual chances of interesting events, the whole place was gay with stalls and booths, while they in their turn were bright with store of posies from the country, bunches of all old-fashioned flowers, lupins and columbine, London pride and golden marigolds, backed by sweetbriar and thyme, and tied together with green wythes. There too might be seen pyramids of snow-white new-laid eggs, and butter yellow as the cowslips that helped to make the milk whence it was churned.

At distances outside the town were sprinkled homesteads, and more pretentious dwellings still; one pre-eminent among the rest for the beauty of its situation and a long avenue of yews, well-nigh black with age, that led to its portal.

This was Dale End, the seat of Sir Roland Ashby, the "great man" of the neighbourhood, but one whose greatness had not hitherto availed to save him from certain domestic trials and embarrassments, in the details of which his humbler neighbours took a sympathetic interest, not untainted by a subtle undercurrent of satisfaction. Wealth and rank, though they may elevate a man above his fellows, do not always lift him out of the reach of sorrow, as the Ashbys of Dale End had of late found to their bitter cost; and, in consequence of this being so, many heads of many wiseacres were sagely shaken in Becklington, while moral sentiments of the most edifying description were quoted without stint on all sides.

Along the side of Becklington market-place ran the town-hall, a building of which the townsfolk were not a little proud—a pride that few unprejudiced beholders felt themselves in a condition to regard in the light of a thing that stood upon just and sure foundation, for an uglier piece of architecture never emanated from the architectural brain. Facing this was Stirling's Bank, an edifice that had apparently taken the bit between its teeth, bolted into a corner, jammed its head against the wall of the lower end of the market-place, and taken up such a position that the rest of it jutted out into a space as a rocky promontory into a bay, so that it fronted two ways—indeed was a double-faced sort of a place altogether, cleverly keeping an eye on the passers-by in two thoroughfares at once.

Its entrance-door was at the end of a dark and narrow passage in an odd and out-of-the-way corner, shrinking from the general eye of the public, as if, in the interests of financial matters, it had some reason for being hidden and secret in its ways. In truth, strangers visiting Stirling's Bank, doubtless to deposit therein large sums of money, had been known to wander round and round under the impression that there was a proper and dignified front door somewhere if they could only find it, and to consider themselves injured, and to look upon their personal dignity as wounded, because, there being no other way in, they were constrained at last to be content with the meanness of the dark and narrow entry and the shabby door. Perhaps they tried to persuade themselves that it was all part and parcel of a crafty design for the safety of the—presumably—immense treasure contained in the bank, and out of this frame of mind grew a comfortable satisfaction as to the safety of their own particular fraction of that treasure for all time to come, and an inclination to look upon the sneaking door as they might have looked upon the slit in a huge money box, through which it was the easiest thing in the world to put money in, and an almost impossible feat to get it out.

The chimneys of this building were wide and low, and bore no sort of family resemblance to each other. One of the lowest and widest of all was clasped, and wreathed, and made a regular jack-in-the-green of by an ivy-plant, which, having its origin in some hidden cranny or *cul de sac*,

suddenly appeared in the form of sundry bare serpent-like stems crawling up the wall and over the slates, to burst into wonderful vigour, and display a marvellous wealth of green leaves and blackberries, causing no doubt, the various sparrows who chirped and fluttered about it to imagine they lived in the country, and had a vast advantage over their fellows who frequented the adjacent streets and houses.

And now, just as the pollards on the river-bank were becoming conscious of their own shadows; just as the flowers were bending in the fields, and every bough was swaying ever so gently in the earliest breeze of dawn; just as an odd rook or two uttered a sleepy "caw," standing on the edge of his nest and ruffling the feathers of his long-folded wings; a blue filmy smoke that had been rising from this ivy-bound chimney, veiling the stars when they shone their brightest, began to wane as they waned, grew more vapour-like, grew indistinct, grew fainter still, was seen no more.

Surely some busy toiler burnt the midnight oil, some active brain kept vigil, while all the world around was sleeping, in Becklington Bank; and now, as grey lines began to cross the eastern sky, as the river, and, far beyond, the sea stirred and trembled beneath the first touch of dawn, that toiler sought a welcome and well-earned repose. If this were so, then Nature soon reversed this order of things, waking to renewed activity after her night's sleep.

Robin, rousing himself from his slumbers, preened his rosy waistcoat and straightway set himself to look by the still uncertain light for that early worm promised by the proverb to the bird who shall be up betimes. The sparrows, a cross ill-tempered crew, put in an appearance in the market-place, hoping for scattered grain, spilt from unsteady hands at the market of the day but one before, while as for the swallows, whose minds were in a turmoil as to the near necessity of gathering themselves together for their yearly flight, they performed such acrobatic feats in the way of clinging on to the walls of the church tower, and then swooping away into the town and hanging themselves up against chimneys and in gables, making such a pretty flutter, and twittering over it all, that surely the sparrows, to a man—if one may be allowed such an expres-

sion—must have wished themselves swallows. And even Robin——

No; Robin could never bring himself to barter the glory of his crimson breast, and all the love we give him because he braves the keenest winter to cheer our hearts in the long cold days with his pretty piping, for any length of flight or swiftness of wing!

With the passing of each moment the shadows of the pollards grew more distinct, always trembling with the stirring of the tide, but more and more clearly defined in the growing light—the light that from silvery grey began to turn to gold.

For the sun was rising, and his gladsome greeting was given back to him in gladness by the world on which he set himself to shine with such goodwill.

A little later still, and the red-tiled roofs of the homesteads glowed with a burnished brightness at once ruddy and golden, and could anyone have turned himself into a bird, and taken a bird's-eye view of Becklington and its surroundings, he would have seen the river running molten gold, and all its many outlets mouths of fire; while the tip of every bough on every tree would have borne golden leaves. Even the wings of the swallows, as they flew circling hither and thither in a sea of blue, caught the reflection and were flecked with gold for the nonce, while, as to the vane on Becklington town-hall, it was a dazzling sight, and must have made the swallows blink again as they neared it.

It was in truth a beauteous morning which now broke upon the rather lazy town, and little Jake, the cobbler, thought as much to himself as he came to his shop-door and surveyed Nature as represented by Becklington market-place, and what could be seen of the roofs of adjacent houses from that standpoint, with the dignity becoming a man who stood upon his own threshold, and had a boy under him to take the shutters down while he looked on.

The weazened old cobbler had so long been spoken of and to as little Jake, that it appeared likely both he and his neighbours had forgotten any other and more definite appellation which might have belonged to him in the remote ages, but assuredly had not stuck to him. He

would doubtless have had to hesitate a moment if asked suddenly to take oath as to whether Jake was his family or baptismal name, or neither.

Jake was the greatest gossip in the market-place. Nor did he hide this qualification under a bushel, rather did he set it on a hill, and chuckled as he laid claim to knowing "more nor twenty men—aye, nor women-folk either—and that's a bold thing to say, neighbours, for one as knows their ways—of what goes on i' Becklington, and many a mile o' country round about it too."

All day long Jake sat on a low, broad bench facing his shop-window (of which the ledge was so low as to be on a level with his knees, and which was merely an unglazed square opening with a double shutter), with his tools beside him, and somebody's boot or somebody's shoe upon his knee.

Jake had a way of tucking his legs (such spindle-shanks as they were, mere apologies for the ordinary lower limbs of man) under this bench, as if conscious of their deficiencies, still further shrouding them from public view by a vast leathern apron coloured bronze and black with long service.

In and out, in and out, flew his busy awl; on and on wagged his busy tongue, while he made or mended, patched or heeled. Every passer-by lingered to have a word with Jake, for all the town had grown to look upon him as a sort of newspaper in human form edited by himself, and sure to be in possession of the last bit of news, the latest tit-bit of town or county scandal. For there was scandal in those days that seem so far away (only seem, for in reality they are but a span off), though it was not diffused so rapidly as now, and had perhaps a greater chance of holding some shadow of truth in it, since it was not passed from hand to hand so quickly, nor flung so far.

Workmen going home to dinner; tradesmen on their way to or from the making of wonderful bargains; farmers' men driving big top-heavy carts of hay that were pulled up with many a sonorous "Whoa!" and "Stand by, there!" opposite the cobbler's stall, and there made of themselves fragrant sweet-scented obstructions in the king's highway; these and many others stayed to have a word with Jake.

Nor were loiterers of a better condition lacking, such as

the Rev. Cuthbert Deane, own cousin to Sir Roland Ashby, a divine much beloved and trusted both by rich and poor; and Dr. Turtle, genteelest of physicians; while even that young buck, Sir Roland's son and heir—of whom none in Becklington or out of it had a good word to say—had been known to bid Jake the time of day and prate of his own ill-doings, as to which he was never shy or shame-faced, but rather boasted of them before the world.

Jake's spectacles had a trick of resting half-way down his nose, so that he could the more conveniently watch the progress of his work; but the boy before alluded to—one Abel Dibbs by name—did solemnly declare that when "Maister Jake" looked over his spectacles he saw just as well as, if not better than, when he looked through them.

Now he held them in his hand as he surveyed the morning—always with an eye to the boy, though—and as he held them they caught in their turn the gleam of the golden sunlight, twinkling as though they were living eyes and not mere glass for other eyes to look through.

In time to come, when Jake told the story of that day's fair dawn, he was apt to assert that he—the boy of course went for nothing—was the first living thing abroad in the old market-place.

"And, deary me, how peaceful it all did look!" he would say, with his head on one side, and those spindles, his legs, wavering as he talked; "how quiet and serene! As lovely a day as ever I set eyes on, with the sun a shinin' and the birds a singin' and Amos Callender opposite a shavin' himself at an upper window as simple and unsuspectin' as the child unborn. I can't well call to mind a finer mornin', and there I stood, at peace with all the world, as one may say"—again the boy counted for nothing, for Jake was never at peace with the boy—"but still a voice within me seemed to say: 'Jake, my good man, there's a storm a brewin' as shall shake that there market-place, and you along wi' it, to the very centre of its bein'.'"

By this it will be seen that the cobbler was what may be called a "knowledgeable man"—one who took in a weekly newspaper and read it aloud to a select circle on a Saturday night at The Safe Retreat, interspersing the letter-press with comments of his own that were looked upon by his

hearers as a costly mental embroidery more valuable by far than the stuff which formed their groundwork—ergo, his impressions of the peacefulness of the golden morning in question were things not to be slighted, nor yet without a certain significance of their own.

As there are spots upon the sun, so were there flaws in Jake's knowledgeableness, for this mental embroidery of his had at times a tendency to become too elaborate; in other words, his fancy bolted with him as though it had been a fiery and unmanageable steed, and carried him, as his friend and neighbour Amos Callender feelingly remarked, "the Lord knows where."

Jake dreamed dreams and saw visions, and then tried to palm them off upon the world as facts—or may be, in his infinite belief in himself, himself mistook them for realities, as on the present occasion, when there is not the slightest reason to suppose that he was conscious of any evil presentiment at all, as he stood in the sunlight on his own doorstep, and ruminated how much he should charge Dr. Turtle for the "job" of putting a patch on his left-foot riding-boot and levelling the heel of its fellow.

In the matter of claiming to be the first man astir in the market-place on that eventful morning in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and thirty-seven, it is probable that Jake had better justification.

True that in the farms that were scattered round Becklington warm milk from full udders had spurted into the milking-cans, making a merry music of its own, an hour ago; yard-dogs had come out of their kennels with mighty yawns and stretchings of cramped limbs, and had set to work to bark at nothing, and to warn nobody off the premises, that being the way in which every well-bred watch-dog naturally begins the day; cocks had defied one another, answering from farm to farm like rival clarions from rival castles; the ducks had set their flat bills to gabble in the gutters, and the swirl of the churns might have been heard in the sweet cool dairies.

But Town, that modish lady, is never such an early riser as the fairer, simpler wench, her sister, Country, so all this counts for nothing as set against Jake's boastful statement.

There was the lamplighter of course, he who felt a certain

pride in his occupation of an evening, when, going on his rounds, he found himself not without some following of admiring urchins, ardent to watch him set his flecks of light at distances, like flowers in a garden, but was apt to regard the street-lamps as his bitterest enemies when they had to be put out at an hour when happier mortals were still burrowing in sleepy pillows. *He* didn't count for much. There was no merit in *his* early rising. What is obligatory can never be meritorious; and, had that lamplighter failed in his matutinal duties, would not the town council and corporation have dismissed him with ignominy, taken his little ladder from him, and never let him run up and down it any more!

Oh yes, he knew on which side his bread was buttered; and though he might like his evening duties best because there was more glory to be got out of them, and they showed him up in the light of a kind of public benefactor, there was no fear he would shirk the morning work, as long as the post was well paid, and the gentry tipped the holder of it at Christmas time! So the lamplighter also went to the wall, looked upon as a point to be made against Jake's claims.

The fact was Jake's boy was a proverb for a lie-abed, and his master had to play the part of clarion. Else would Abel be found "snoring his head off" at an hour the shutters should be down, the shop tidied up, and pine-sticks crackling in the back-room grate. Truly, if snoring could have taken Abel's head off, that interesting youth would have been decapitated long since, for a style of breathing that would have meant apoplexy in anybody else, only meant healthy slumber in Abel; he being, as his mother owned with tears on the occasion of his apprenticeship to the shoemaking trade, a "heavy feeder," and in consequence "a bit hard to drive."

Therefore did Jake survey the awakening world, always keeping an eye upon the boy.

Before long all the sounds and sights of daily life made themselves perceptible. Here and there a blind was raised, like a lazy eye opening, and the worthy man Callender no longer enjoyed the monopoly of the upper windows, while passers-by became frequent in the market-place.

Right merrily shone the sun as he rose higher and

higher in the heavens, winking and blinking in Jake's spectacles, and setting Dr. Turtle's silver snuff-box on fire, as that talented and elegant physician came tripping across that market-place, stepping as delicately as though the round stones with which it was paved were eggs, and he was afraid of breaking them.

Discreetly and professionally attired in black stockings, knee-breeches, long-skirted coat, and many-folded kerchief, fastened with a dainty pin about his neck, the Beckington Æsculapius was a pleasant sight to see. As the result of an inveterate habit of snuffing, he was apt to be a little powdery, but was none the worse for that in the eyes of his admirers. His was the most loyal of souls, the "ocean to the river of his thoughts" being the coronation of a girl-queen in the month of roses. So absorbing was his delight in this fair and patriotic subject that it was never long absent from his discourse, and he had some ado to keep it out of his prescriptions.

Dr. Turtle wore a wig, *he* said from a love for a bygone fashion; the evil-minded vowed from a cause more urgent, and asserted that so sensitive was he as to the baldness of his pate, that, when ill, he lay abed in his wig, and had left directions in his will that he was to be buried in it.

It was a rather full and very becoming wig, dark-brown, and curly at the ends, and from out this penthouse looked his handsome eyes, dark and twinkling, ever ready to see the droll side of everything, and finding a suitably grave expression difficult to attain to on certain sorrowful professional occasions. His smile was buoyant, the teeth it displayed excellent, his age a mystery, his skill undeniable.

"Out early, doctor," said Jake, touching his scrubby tow-coloured locks respectfully, and shaking a furtive fist at the boy, who stood to gape at the new comer.

"Yes; a patient to see betimes. No bad thing either, Jake, to have to be out on such a morning. Queen's weather—queen's weather! Just such a day, you may be sure, as shone upon that sweet young creature—— Hey day! they're slug-abeds over yonder," cried the doctor, breaking the thread of his sentence off sharp, and almost pirouetting on the stones in the velocity with which he turned himself about. "What's this?—what's this?"

Jake rubbed his eyes and rumpled his sparse locks. The boy, for once unrebuked, stared in the same direction as the other two, opening his mouth at the same time as his eyes, the better to take in the unwonted aspect of affairs.

"Lord bless my soul!" ejaculated the doctor, hastily pocketing his snuff-box, and setting his glasses gingerly astride his nose. "Are they all murdered in their beds over there?"

Assuredly the employés of the Becklington Bank had overslept themselves, for, though every puddle left in the market-place by the rain of the day before laughed and dimpled in the sunshine—though the garish light beat upon barred windows as if to try and shame them for shutting out anything so bright and beautiful, there was no sign of life or stir about the place.

The doctor stared; Jake stared; the boy stared hardest of all. Presently others came to help them. Little groups of two or three gathered at the corners of the streets, and every eye was fixed upon the bank, which stared blankly, as a blind man might.

And as the hour wore on the sounds of life became the sounds of strife, stir became tumult, wonderment grew to mingled rage and fear.

Something strange, sinister, untoward, had come about in the good town of Becklington.

CHAPTER II.

RUIN UPON RUIN, ROUT ON ROUT.

SPEAKING in time to come of that eventful day ushered in by a dawn so fair and bright—that day of terrible disaster that, like a deep and jagged wound, took long to heal, and left a cruel scar behind it, even then, the wife of Amos Callender (he whom we have already seen shaving at an upper window, lapped in a false peace and smilingly reposeful as he looked at his own image in a small circular glass, as if he were not wholly displeased with it) was wont to say, piously returning thanks, that it was "a blessing

from above" that her good man had put his razor out of sight before the full and bitter truth was known, else might some rash and daring deed have been wrought by his despairing hand.

Amos Callender was by trade a tanner, and, thanks to a long business career of industry and upright dealing, well to do; secure indeed (or so he thought) of spending the evening of his days in a well-earned repose, sweetened by the possession of well-earned savings.

What, indeed, could any man do more than toil hard and live within sight of the hive wherein he stored his honey, in other words, of the bank wherein he placed with methodical regularity the overplus of his weekly expenses?

With heart as full of cheer as the world was just then full of sunshine did Amos sit down that morning to the breakfast, where all was as neat and trim as active hands could make it.

In the window hung a bird in its cage, a mule canary, whose little golden throat swelled with a gladsome song to greet the golden day. Below this cage was a fuchsia plant laden with drooping clusters of crimson bells; and trained against a fan-shaped piece of trellis-work, fashioned by Jake their opposite neighbour, in a leisure hour, and thought to be rather a neat thing in its way.

During the early hours of the day, Mr. Callender's was the sunny side of the market-place, and the light, filtering throught the nest of pale green leaves and crimson bells in the window, fell merrily upon the breakfast table, also upon Amos himself, in the easy and homely costume of shirt-sleeves and long-flapped waistcoat of grey fustian, seated opposite his smiling wife, and vowing, with his mouth full of bread-and-butter, that "a finer mornin', to the best of his experience, never arose upon this sinful world." Amos was punishing the victuals and no mistake, and there upon a handy chair-back hung his coat, all ready to be pulled on ere he set out for the tanyard that lay near the riverside.

"It's a fine thing, too," continued the worthy tanner, "to hear that bird there singin' fit to burst his yellow skin, praisin' the Lord, no doubt, 'after his kind,' and doin' of it well, too."

Amos made this slight scriptural quotation with a certain

complacency, as of one who, possessing a suitable way of putting things, still strives to display a becoming humility of demeanour, in spite of gifts. But this smirk of self-satisfaction and conscious merit presently changed by slow degrees to a gaping stare of astonishment, as one dissolving view melts into another; for first one hurrying figure, then another, each and all gesticulating wildly, began to cross the disc of the window where the bird still sang and the flowers still blossomed, though the one might well have been silenced, and the other blighted, by the chill breath of coming disaster.

"Whatever's ado?" said Amos to the good wife, whose spoon was held suspended between cup and mouth in a growing bewilderment. "I reckon there's a fire somewheres. Lord send it's not the bank, my lass!"

The last words of this fervent aspiration were uttered as Amos made his way along the passage to the street-door, and the next moment the wondering eyes of his spouse were greeted by the sight of him, all hatless and coatless as he was, tearing away down the street as if he had suddenly taken leave of his senses, or, as the good woman subsequently expressed it, "as spry as Jake's boy that time the black bull chased him down Baker's Alley, and into the rag-and-bone shop at the corner."

"Whatever's ado?" said Mrs. Callender in her turn, hastening to the door and shading her eyes from the glint of the sunshine, the better to survey the rapidly gathering crowd.

"The Bank?" shouted a man as he passed, eager to get to the front, and make himself part and parcel of the general expression. "It's stopped!"

"Well, if the fire's stopped, what are all the fools gadding for?" said Mrs. Callender, a woman of simple nature, slow to take in facts that lay outside the home that was her world.

"Stopped payment!" bawled a second passer-by, making a speaking-trumpet of his hand, the better to convey his news without being obliged to slacken speed.

Mrs. Callender, struck dumb as she afterwards declared, turned slowly round, walked down the narrow passage, and into the room where the unfinished breakfast appeared in

the light of "funeral baked meats" to her dazed and staring eyes, pinned an old shawl over the canary to stop its singing, flung her apron over her own head, sat down thus shrouded against the window-shutter, and never stirred hand or foot till Amos came in, dropped into a chair, and told her that she saw in him a man who "stood in his shirt."

By his homely expression, however, no reflection was meant to be cast upon the worthy tanner's propriety of demeanour in public, but the simple truth simply stated that the shirt on his back went nigh to represent the entire sum of his earthly possessions.

Mrs. Callender subsequently informed a neighbour that when she pulled the apron off her head, and took a look at Amos, "his face was white as chalk, and like the window-pane on a rainy day wi' sweat." Indeed, the good tanner presented a sufficiently ghastly appearance, and his mild and feeling disposition seemed to have undergone some strange and woeful change.

"It's well you put summat on the bird there to stop its singin', lass, or I'd have broke every bar in its cage, and wrung its neck, too, that would I—I couldna' bide to hear it, lass, and such a weight of sorrer pressing on my 'art. All as I've toiled for—all as I've saved to make yo' a well-to-do widdy when time should come for such to be—all as I've laid by, a-thinking many and many time, when up to my knees i' hides, 'Our Em'ly shall be well done by yet, and 'prenticed to a fine business up in York city,' and now it's a' gone—same as a snow-drift i' thaw time. I'm glad the little wench is up-country for an outin', for Lord knows it 'ud go hard wi' me this day to look upon her face!"

Bess, woman-like, thought more of her husband's sorrow than of the cause of it. No doubt it was a terrible thing that the Bank should have stopped payment, but for Amos to look so wild and talk about wringing dicky's neck to stop him from singing was worse.

Better to lose all you possessed on earth—better to 'stand in your shirt," as the saying had it—than have to stand by and see your husband go mad; and this last crowning calamity was what poor Bess now feared.

Amos, pushing the remains of his breakfast aside with no gentle hand, and having thus cleared a space, laid his arms on

the table, laid his head on his arms, and broke out crying like a child.

Then Bess took heart.

She stole to his side, and put her arm about his shoulders.

"When a ship's wrecked, Amos," she said, "happen there's here and there a one saved. Things mayn't be as bad as they look, my dear."

Meanwhile, outside, crowd and tumult grew.

Dr. Turtle appeared to be gifted with a multiple presence for the occasion. His wide-brimmed hat was set far back on his head; he took endless imaginary pinches of snuff; he even forgot the coronation of our most gracious Sovereign for the time being, not once alluding to it in the many agitated conferences held with the various sections of the populace. If the Bank had been a sick man the doctor's opinion of its strange appearance could not have been more ardently sought; and he was all the more able to give the wisest counsel, and express the sagest ideas on the subject, from the fact of his name not being on its books as a depositor, and his personal property being safely invested elsewhere.

As one whose feet stand firm on land can best help the drowning, so did Dr. Turtle feel himself thoroughly qualified to counsel and sustain his floundering fellow-townsmen.

An eager group gathered about him, pressing upon him and one another; eager eyes stared into his; now and again a shaking hand grasped his arm.

"There is something wrong, no doubt," said he sententiously—"something grievously wrong; but doubtless we shall know all about it in time, therefore let us endeavour to keep ourselves as calm as may be. An attitude at once calm and expectant is, I take it, the way in which to meet such an emergency as the present. Such philosophy is however beyond the reach of certain temperaments. Ahem! thank you kindly, let me pass."

A woman, dressed in widow's weeds, and with a frightened child clinging to her black gown, had fainted, and the doctor (never once ceasing to moralize all the while) made his way to her side. Poor soul! she was one who could not attain to the calm and expectant attitude of true philosophy.

Jake, who seemed to be not one but twenty Jakes for the nonce, had his hat off in a trice and began wafting it backwards and forwards before the woman's dead white face with laudable energy.

"She's took it to 'art awful," said Jake, working away like a winnowing machine; "that's what it is, doctor, and there's three more young 'uns at home too. I know by their boots you see—three soles, one patch; this is the patch, I take it by the size of him. There sha'n't go no bill along home with them boots, doctor, for I reckon she's lost her little all, as the saying goes, and Heaven help the widow and the fatherless if the neighbours won't put a hand to the job."

Between them the fainting creature was taken to the shelter of a shop, and there she waited, the boy always clinging to her, she always clinging to the boy; now and again the two kissed each other; they looked indeed more at each other than at the crowd.

"You'll come and tell me?" said the woman, touching Jake's sleeve with a pale hand; on which the wedding-ring hung loosely.

"That I will, never fear," shouted Jake as he precipitated himself into the crowd and was whirled away like a straw by a turgid stream.

But when the cruel truth, the truth that was so much more cruel than anyone had thought it could be, came to be known, Jake was terribly troubled at having to fulfil his promise. He pushed his way through the concourse of excited and indignant people with a certain leisureness, as one who goes to a tryst with unwilling feet.

Somehow he kept saying over and over to himself: "Three soles and a patch—three soles and a patch," a row of little shabby boots representing in his mind's eye the "young 'uns" who had been robbed of their little all.

Yes, that was it—robbed.

Whence came the first whisper of the sinister and cruel rumour who might say? It seemed to attain full growth at birth. It was on every tongue, echoed by every voice, in the space of one moment.

Stirling's Bank had been robbed.

Still with closed windows and barred door it faced the

noisy crowd, blankly as a blind man might. No living creature had been seen to pass in or out through the lurking door at the end of the narrow passage, and yet the people cried out that there had been foul play, that this was no ordinary commercial calamity, no stoppage that might be but a temporary trouble and presently yield a dividend however small.

No; what had come about in their midst—had come about in the town that lay bathed in the glorious sunlight of that golden day—was the committal of a crime, a crime that meant ruin to many a home, a crime by which the widow and the orphan, the lonely and the desolate ones of life, should suffer, by which the wages of honest toil and the tiny hoard of the aged and feeble should be wrested from their lawful owners by a hand invisible, impalpable, reaching out from the darkness to clutch and hold.

Denser and denser grew the crowd that beat against the Bank as the sea beats against a rock that juts out into its depths.

Curses, cries, groans of impatience and despair, filled the sun-bright air.

The narrow passage was blocked by a struggling mass of humanity, each unit in the mass striving to reach the door.

A woman, by dint of that mad strength and despairing energy sometimes shown by the sex in times of great excitement of feeling, had forced herself to the front, and there, raising her arms high above the crush and pressure of those around her, beat upon the door with her open hands, crying out that if they did not let her in she would tear the door down.

So may a bird beat his wings against the bars of an iron cage, alike wild and helpless. More terrible still was a man, strange and foreign-looking, with long black hair and cavernous deep eyes, whom grief seemed to have benumbed and dazed. His face, white and stricken, stood out from the sea of faces about him by reason of its ghastly pallor and fixed intensity of expression. These about him heard him mutter to himself, saw him strain and tear at the deep collar of his shabby coat, themselves muttering in their turn that surely Gabriel Devenant was mad—that was, madder than usual.

That he was always a little—some people said a good deal—mad, was a generally admitted fact, nor had the circumstance that he occasionally spoke to himself in a foreign tongue been at any time looked upon as reassuring. Sane people, in the opinion of Becklington, were content with the Queen's English, and very properly so; nor did the fact that Mr. Devenant was only a stranger and pilgrim in the land plead for him aught in this matter. It would have been better, said the wise, had he dropped all foreign nonsense from the first.

But he had not done so, and now the words that fell from his pale drawn lips were these:

"*Ma reine—ma petite reine!* Hilda — my little Hilda . . ."

A fond and foolish mingling of tongues, it must be confessed.

"Doubtless," said the suave voice of Dr. Turtle at the man's elbow, "this suspense will now shortly terminate—we shall know the worst, or perhaps it may be the best, of things—we shall be able to rally our moral forces as it were. Meanwhile an attitude of calm——" but here the doctor broke off suddenly in his discourse, and stared hard at Gabriel Devenant. "Eh, eh!" he said, touching the man's arm; "bless me, what's this, Mr. Devenant! I must really beg of you—this condition is positively cataleptic, a most dangerous strain upon the delicately organised vessels of the brain. My very dear sir, rouse yourself I entreat of you; they cannot keep us in suspense much longer."

"Suspense!" gasped the unhappy object of this adjuration, catching at the words eagerly; "yes, it is that that is so terrible. It is the waiting—and there is Hilda—you know my little Hilda—I have been a poor man as riches go, a poor man as some would say, but it has been enough. I have never grumbled—no one can say that of me. It was enough for her, but now the time is past when I could have made more. I have been a failing man—a failing man this while back. I could not work at the old work now, even if——And there is Hilda, you know—Hilda singing at her work."

The doctor spoke very gently, as tenderly in truth as though this gaunt wild-eyed man were a suffering child.

"Come," he said, "you are not fit for such a scene as this. Let me take you to my house; you shall have some wine, and directly there is any news——"

But with a low strangled cry Gabriel Devenant broke away from the kindly hand that would have led him to a quiet shelter, and, battling wildly with the crowd, as might a swimmer with the waves of a stormy sea, took up a position some distance off, glancing back fearfully ere he settled once more to the old absorbed watching, waiting, and muttering.

"Bless my soul!" said the doctor, and took a prolonged pinch of imaginary snuff.

Becklington Bank was a private financial enterprise, of which two partners, uncle and nephew, were the heads. The manager, old Anthony Geddes, had grown grey in their service, and was popularly supposed to be the heart and soul of that outward framework called the House. A man of great resource, probity, energy, and method, he was at at the same time humble in his estimation of himself, the whole eye of his mind being taken up with the dignity and splendour of the Firm, and the wide-spread confidence felt by the world in general in the House. The books of the bank were, in Anthony's eyes, as so many Korans in the eyes of the followers of Mahomet. He had a way of slightly bowing his head, with its long scanty fringe of white locks, when he mentioned the Firm, and letting his voice drop, as though he spoke of some sacred thing when he mentioned the House.

At one time Mr. Geddes inhabited rooms in the Bank itself; but the junior partner, a man of tender heart and sympathetic nature, thought that the health of the faithful henchman grew feeble, and that for him to live in a more open part of the town, and combine horticulture in a small way with banking in a large way, would in all probability mend matters.

The deeply-rooted tree was craftily drawn from its bed to be planted in new soil; in other words, Anthony was despatched upon an important and confidential errand to York city, and when he returned found there had been what he called a "flitting" during his absence. The rooms in the bank had been given over to a couple of saucy clerks,

and Mrs. Geddes, together with all her household treasures, was located in a bonnie cottage-like house in Church Lane —a house with a garden (flowers) in front, and a garden (vegetables) behind. In time, Mr. Geddes got over the surprise of these changes, and developed a pride in French beans, and a delight in dahlias. But he never ceased to look upon the two saucy clerks as interlopers, and would cast withering glances at their lares and penates, as one who would say, "You should have seen these rooms when Mrs. Geddes and I had them!" This silent language was quite understood by the interlopers, who it is to be feared put their tongues in their cheeks when the manager's back was fairly turned.

Now, among the restless turbulent crowd in the old market-place, a rumour began to creep, and then to fly, that "some one"—that ubiquitous personage who sees and hears more than any one else—had caught a glimpse of Anthony Geddes "fleein' like a hare wi' dogs after 'un," and the boy Davie at his heels—from the cottage in Church Lane towards the bank. Some one had also seen Mrs. Geddes "struck speechless," and standing, a sort of modern Lot's wife, in the centre of one of her choicest flower-beds, whither in her fear and daze she had unwittingly strayed.

It was also reported that Anthony had carried his hat in his hand; that his lank locks were "streamin' out behind him;" that the boy Davie (of whom more hereafter) had a face "like a young ghost," and was in a general state of heat and agitation impossible to describe, having evidently been sent from the bank to summon Mr. Geddes on the instant. Davie must (so said the wiseacres) have been let out secretly through a certain small arched doorway opening into that dark and narrow alley wherein the ivy-plant before-named had its source, and thence into Church Lane, a thoroughfare that seemed to contain no distant suggestion of anything so important as banking interests, but was of quite a frivolous character, containing shops and, at distances, genteel residences (like that of the bank-manager) with gardens.

Indeed, the dingy door entering from the alley appeared to be a kind of blunder, and a something entirely out of place, like a shabby fellow among his betters, and apt to be

wholly overlooked, or taken as little notice of as he might be.

At an early hour, then—just, in fact, as Jake came to survey the morning from his doorstep, and just as Amos Callender gave his razor its first dip in the little battered tin can that did duty for a shaving-pot—these two, Anthony Geddes and the boy Davie, were seen hurrying along Church Lane towards the bank.

They were going "sly-like" too, as though they wished to make the greatest possible speed, and at the same time attract the least possible notice.

Doubtless the word "robbery," as the suggested cause of this mysterious state of matters, had been let fall by Mrs. Geddes, that good woman being in a condition so limp, abject, and terror-struck, as to fall an easy prey to the designing. That anything should go wrong at the bank appeared to her in the light of a convulsion of nature, for impressions are as catching as measles, and from long companionship with Anthony his wife had grown to look upon the Firm and the House with the same limitless veneration.

True, he had said to her, as he turned to leave the cottage, "Keep a silent tongue, Meg," and there stood the boy Davie, shaking like a leaf, having just delivered himself of a message to the manager from the head clerk.

Meg meant to keep her tongue quiet—of that there can be no doubt—but when her chosen gossip, Mrs. McCann, almost fell into the passage from the impetus conveyed to her massive form by a hurried entrance through the side-door that led into their mutual garden, the reins of Meg's self-government were loosened, and somehow—she really did not know how—in fact, she said afterwards she felt as though in a "walking swound," the word "robbery" dropped from her lips.

From that seed rumour grew,—spread,—became clamour.

The bank had not suspended payment—the bank had been robbed.

Then, as a thing that is tossed upon the surface of a sea, tossed hither and thither, drifted with this eddy and that, rose the sound of a man's name—Geoffrey Stirling.

He was the younger partner in the firm. His uncle, the

senior partner, was just now absent, having gone to London to consult a celebrated oculist as to the state of his sight, which had been failing for some time past.

All the responsibility, all the sorrow of whatever calamity had happened, would fall upon the shoulders of the younger man—a man so universally beloved, held in such high esteem by rich and poor alike, that amid the smart of their own pain many remembered his, and more than one voice in that mad medley of conjecture was heard to say that it would come "hard on Maister Geoffrey," to which another would reply, "Aye, that will it, and him laid on a sick bed, too."

Those who most dreaded the full knowledge of the loss that was coming, those who most shrank from the black shadow looming ahead, felt that the loss would sting and the shadow chill the heart of the junior partner more for others than for himself.

Alison Stirling, his uncle, was a hard man, stern and just, apt to say of misfortune that it was the result of folly, that the victim "deserved all he got;" an excellent man of business, unemotional, self-contained; one who compelled respect rather than won affection, so that when it became known that his sight was affected, that he began to live in a misty world, seeing all things through a haze, people rather pitied his own consequent suffering than suffered for him; rather condoled with his loss of independence than that the sight of those he loved should be lost to him.

Alison Stirling had never married, and was supposed to care for himself more than any other living thing on earth, unless it were the stainlessness of his career as a financier.

True there were those who held that he had a soft spot in his heart for "Mr. Geoffrey," and took a secret, yet intense, pride in Mr. Geoffrey's young son.

Be these things as they might, the senior partner was looked upon as a hard man; and, though some said he would be raging mad at things going wrong in his absence, none said he would be sad or sorry; none said it was "hard upon him," as they said about his nephew.

Patience has its limits, and, pity who they might, the men who surrounded the building that still stared blankly in their faces were rapidly reaching the limit of theirs.

The crowd began to sway this way and that; some one shouted for a crowbar to force the door from its hinges; men clambered to the window-sills; one thrust his fist through the pane, unheeding the broken glass that gashed his flesh.

The first blow struck is always a dangerous precedent.

In a few moments more not a sheet of glass in the lower windows but was shattered to atoms, and clenched fists beat on the shutters to loosen the bolts that held them.

In vain Dr. Turtle, a sort of self-constituted constable, entreated forbearance from those in his immediate neighbourhood; in vain he managed to climb the horse-block at the door of the Red Lion inn, and thence harangued the multitude; in vain he waved the hand of which he was not a little proud, hoping that men might regard it as a flag of truce. They didn't do anything of the kind.

The reign of anarchy and confusion had set in; and passion was in the ascendant; patience and forbearance lay trampled under foot.

A hand, clenching a hard stone, appeared above the heads of the crowd.

Another instant, and it would have been flung—the precursor of many.

But Gabriel Devenant, still maintaining his place of vantage, still grasping the collar of his coat with working fingers, still paler than his fellows, with his black locks falling back from his lifted face, uttered a cry, stretching his arms suddenly upward—a lead that all eyes followed.

Then the clenched hand and the stone it grasped fell, while a murmur like the buzzing of a countless swarm of bees rose high and sank to breathless silence.

One of the windows of the upper story of the bank stood wide open, and there—showing from below like a picture in a frame—stood a man pallid from recent illness,—Geoffrey Stirling.

CHAPTER III.

AN APPEAL.

A FOREHEAD rather high than broad, but somewhat concealed at times by the black grey-lined locks that fell over it; eye-

brows sharp and projecting, everhanging eyes deep-set, dark, keen, and somewhat restless; the rest of the face clear-cut, close-shaven and well-defined, though the lips were too thin for beauty, and the upper one was too long for perfect symmetry.

Such was Geoffrey Stirling—at all events, as seen by the world in general; notably as seen in such a moment of trial as that in which he first appears on the scene of this our story.

His figure was tall and spare, almost gaunt, but not without grace; his hands of wonderful refinement and elegance, yet giving no idea of lack of power; restless when any deep emotion stirred him, infinitely tender and caressing when lightly touching the pretty locks of his only child, little Ralph, the child of his mature age, and, like the late blossom of the year, precious exceedingly.

People called Geoffrey Stirling a shrewd, yet large-hearted, man—two qualities hard to find united in one personality—strict in business, and yet one to whom no tale of sorrow was ever told in vain; in fact an embodiment of antitheses.

They knew him not who did not see his powers of gentle ness, as shown to his wife, a chronic and ever-complaining sufferer; of tenderness, as drawn forth towards the child of his love.

He had married—later in life than most men—impetuously for one so cool-headed. Bewitched by a woman's delicately-tinted and perfectly-refined loveliness he had dreamed his dream of dual life, and awakened to find himself mated with a fool—a loving fool, and not an exacting one, it was true, but still a woman with whom no equality of companionship was possible.

He looked truth in the face, resolved not to expect more than truth, and to make the best of truth, never letting Lucy, his wife, learn that the truth, for him, held—bitter disappointment.

In due time a son was born to him, and then the mother drifted into perpetual ill-health, grew to find a sad pleasure in symptoms, a complacent happiness in detailing the same, and never found in her husband a listless auditor.

Things might have been worse—where, indeed, is the

human being whose state and condition might not be worse?

Lucy might have been a jealous fool—the worst type of the class; or a tyrannical fool—to dwell with whom is like lying on a bed of nettles. As it was, she was thoroughly happy with her ailments and her remedies; always pretty, and given to dainty invalid costumes—"so very interesting," as certain other women averred, not realizing the fact that they only had as much of her as they liked, but that to those who had her always it was possible she might become a trifle wearisome. She loved her husband after a tepid kind of fashion; loved him most of all when he put cushions under her head and shawls over her feet, and went softly because the "symptoms" were worse than usual.

In all the gentle uneventful years of her married life she never once asked herself if she made him happy. It was enough for her to grasp the one important truth that he was considerate and kind, and always checked little Ralph when the buoyancy of his animal spirits caused him to forget "poor mamma's head." This was, however, not often, for the boy was, as a rule, thoughtful beyond his years, and would steal about the house like a young mouse when Nurse Prettyman said mamma must not be disturbed.

Mrs. Stirling—or "Mrs. Geoffrey," as she was called to distinguish her from the possible and visionary wife of the elder Stirling—also loved her son; at least, there is every reason to suppose so, since she went into violent hysterics when he cut his hand with the gardener's pruning-knife, and fainted outright when she saw the poor little finger bandaged up with a blood-bedabbled handkerchief. She used to call Ralph her "darling pride," and was very particular that Nurse Prettyman should keep his clustering locks in the best order; but she never taught him to say his prayers at her knee, or watched the child-mind opening day by day, yearning to guide it aright.

And so it came about that a love—or rather a passion of tenderness—grew up between father and son. Each life lacked something—the one consciously, the other unconsciously—and each in the other found the lacking thing. The boy Ralph was strikingly like his father—like, yet with a difference; the same landscape seen through the glow of

softer light; the same melody set in a sweeter key. Such was little Ralph compared to the man who loved him with every fibre of his being. The father's eyes were keen and bright, the child's grave and wistful, and of a lighter hazel, full of golden lights when he laughed; more heavily lashed. The father's eyes could soften to tenderness, but never lighten into merriment: the child's did so, often. The boy's lips, too, were fuller, though the small determined chin showed a tiny cleft, the miniature of the one in his sire's. Ralph's locks held prisoned sunshine in their fair luxuriance, though they grew like his father's, and he had a droll way of tossing them back that was the perfect reflection of the other. The hands, daintily fashioned, long, slender, yet nervous and full of power, were the hands of Geoffrey himself in little. People said the junior partner in the Becklington Bank was an old-looking man to have so young a child; and this was so, not only because he had married late in life, but because his fifty years sat heavily upon him —as years are apt to do upon the head of any man whose lot in life it is to try and make the best of things, carefully avoiding the worst. People said, too, that Geoffrey Stirling had grown to look much older since his marriage.

So he had; for daily self-repression and a strained adaptation of self to the unsympathetic nature of another tells more upon mind and body than any sudden call for heroism, or any swift and bitter ordeal of pain.

As he faced the crowd gathered about the bank, in the sudden silence that had followed so quickly on the heels of tumult, every eye raised to the open window where he stood, it might well have been said that Geoffrey Stirling looked in very truth an old man for his years. . . . It has been said that he had risen from a bed of sickness at the call of a terrible rumour, and that he bore the marks of recent suffering yet about him. Of haste, too, for his hair was unkempt, his dress disordered, the wide black scarf about his neck lay in careless folds, from which a small gold pin and chain depended; his frilled shirt was unbuttoned at the throat, leaving its long and swarthy column exposed; his mulberry-coloured coat had been drawn on hastily, and hung loosely upon a form which had grown somewhat gaunt and hollow in the chest of late.

He leant one hand against the window-frame, raising it high above his head; the other, when first the crowd caught sight of him, was pressed upon his breast, and he seemed to draw his breath heavily, as might one who had laboured up a hill and but just reached the summit.

As he thus stood for a moment silent, immovable, more than ever looking from below like a picture in its frame, a low murmur of sound, like the rise and whirr of myriad flies disturbed from a feast of carrion, came from the watching crowd.

Each man and woman was whispering to the one next them, surmising this or that as indicated by the demeanour of the man at the window. But at the first sound of his voice the hissing of a thousand whispers died.

"My friends——" he said and got no further for the moment, since a brawny farmer, whip in hand and pale with the situation in which he found himself, cut his speech short with an exclamation uttered in a voice as big and as burly as himself:

"That we be, Maister Geoffrey—every man and mother's son of us—let what may be 'oop wi' t' bank, and thee wi' it!"

Again the myriad flies buzzed—in affirmation this time.

"Thanks, thanks," said Geoffrey Stirling, letting his hand drop to his side, and leaning further forward so as to be heard the more plainly; "I am sure of that, Farmer Dale—sure of that; and all the more because I am so sure of that, I wish with all my heart that what I have to tell you now could be softened, or, in any way, made less bitter and cruel than it is—to you and to me——"

He hesitated a moment while the crowd swayed and shook as you may see the treetops in a forest stir and shake as the wind buffets them this way or that, for every atom in the whole strove to get nearer and nearer to the open window that was put to the use of a rostrum for the nonce.

Jake, in his flounderings, turns, and twistings, seemed to be swimming determinedly against stream, for the thought of the sad face beneath the widow's cap, and of "the patch," mumchance, at once loving, and frightened out of his young wits, clinging on his mother's rusty black gown, to say nothing of the "three soles" at home, nerved his arm, and dowered those spare legs of his with a new agility.

So Jake got well to the front, and there too was Gabriel Devenant, for whom (just because he had such a mad-like look about him), way had been made by the more sane of the community.

The unhappy man had clasped his hands behind his head, and with upturned face—a face that looked like a mask save for the glowing eyes that burned from under shaggy brows—listened for the speaker's next words, as might the criminal for his doom.

"I know," said the voice from above, "that a rumour gained credence among you an hour ago to the effect that the bank had stopped payment."

"We'en heered a wur story still, Maister Geoffrey, sin' last hour struck," cried out Farmer Dale, again cutting the thread of the junior partner's story: "and we're looking for to hear yo' call it the domed lee as it is. Choke them as set it goin', say I!"

The hand that grasped the window-frame closed more nervously upon it, and with stronger tension.

"It is not a lie," said Geoffrey Stirling, "it is a cruel truth. A great crime has been committed in our midst—the bank has been robbed!"

As this last word passed the lips of the speaker, there was a shriek from Gabriel Devenant—he flung up his arms as if in a wild appeal to Heaven, and fell convulsed and foaming at the mouth into the arms of those nearest to him.

Dr. Turtle, who had maintained his hardly-won position on the horse-block, keeping up a running commentary to which no one paid the smallest attention, and, having found his snuff-box, taking snuff enough to have blown any other man's head off, at this precipitated himself into the crowd, promptly had the sick man borne to a place of safety, and there set to work to minister to him, or, as Jake's boy put it, "give hisself up to bringin' the por gentle'em to."

All these things were not done amid peace and silence, for a perfect Babel of voices had arisen, and Geoffrey Stirling, seeing the hopelessness of making himself heard, folded his arms, leant against the side of the window, and—waited.

The tumult grew. Some one cried out that it would be well to break into the bank, for those who would suffer by

the crime that had been committed could then see for themselves how matters stood. Not one, but a score of hands, were raised above the sea of heads, each grasping a stone.

There was a rush and sway towards the lower windows, still closely barred, though broken.

The hubbub increased. With every moment the situation became more and more critical.

Of what avail was the valour—tried and well-known though it might be—of Matthew Hawthorne, constable-in-chief of Becklington and the surrounding country, in the face of such an emergency? Matthew had been a soldier: he had also been provided at the expense of the ratepayers with a tall glazed hat, supposed to be an article peculiarly adapted to resist the whacks which the helmet of so doughty a champion would naturally receive in the onerous discharge of his duty.

But the glazed hat was trampled under foot; and Matthew himself—a mere effigy of himself—was ignominiously crushed flat against the wall of the Court-house, and there held in durance vile, no one paying the slightest heed to his remonstrances upon such unseemly treatment of a "Queen's officer."

As Geoffrey Stirling watched the turmoil below, a lank and trembling hand was laid upon his sleeve, and a voice, husky with fear, said urgently:

"Come away, come away, Master Geoffrey; they're mad, they know not what they do. Heaven pity them, and give them back their senses!"

With a sudden sweet smile the man addressed turned a moment to the speaker.

"Never fear, Anthony," he said; "they will not hurt me. It is only an impulse; it will pass."

The large timid eyes, the lank white locks of the manager, were seen at the window as the old man peered at the crowd below.

To his simple mind it seemed as though the end of all things was at hand—as if the sun should suffer fell eclipse instead of shining on unblinkingly on such a scene; as if the heavens might fall, or the solid earth be upheaved and rent.

The House had been robbed; the Firm was in trouble.

What more had fate in its power to do? How could any man be expected to face such a state of things and live? But yet there was Master Geoffrey, the man whose lips had never yet uttered a word that savoured not of kindness to his faithful servant, the man whom he could call to mind a dark-eyed stripling, pliant as a willow-wand, full of life and earnestness, a sight to gladden the eyes—the man who, when poor old Anthony lay sick, had sat by his bed, held his hand, cheered him with gentle words of sympathy and hope—there was Master Geoffrey to be thought of.

But the danger passed; the impulse of destruction and revenge rose as a wave rises before the wind, then died. Curiosity was the oil upon the water.

"Why dunnot yo' be still, lads, and hearken to what Maister Geoffrey's got to say?" Farmer Dale had shouted lustily. "Yo' can wreck t' bank when yo' know all about the matter, if so be as yo' see aught to gain by't."

The common sense of the man's words commended them to the hearers. The crisis passed, as Geoffrey Stirling had said it would. A hearing was now possible.

"I am glad you have made up your minds to listen to me," he said—and it was wonderful how far the clear resonant voice travelled, "for I want you to know all the truth—that is, as much of it as can be known at present. It is of no use for me to try and make things better than they are, or to deny that heavy loss must come upon many of you. The bank has been broken into, and—hard of belief as such a thing may seem, both to you and to me—almost gutted."

There was a stir and rustle at this, but no one spoke. Ears were strained too intently for tongues to wag easily.

"Every desk and locker has been opened, either by false keys or picklocks. The iron safes in the wall stand wide open; a handful or two of ashes on the hearth are all that remain of the ledgers. This morning, when the head clerk came to his desk, he found it open, and the keys of the safes gone. The evil deed has been very thoroughly done—planned surely by no dullard—carried out without fear or compunction. A large sum in gold, notes for large amounts, bonds, bills, securities—all are missing. It rests with you to give those who will undertake the task every chance of

detecting the perpetrators of the crime and of tracing the stolen money. No time has been lost; a messenger has been already despatched to London; a Bow Street runner will be here as quickly as possible. The same messenger will also summon the senior partner to my help, I have done all I can."

"Aye, aye, we dunnut doubt that, Maister Geoffrey," said a voice from the crowd; "we dunnut doubt that, and yo' risen from a sick-bed to coom and try to gi' us a word o' comfort; it's as hard on yo', Maister Geoffrey, as on us and our wives and children, as any man wi' two eyes i' his yed may see for himsen." It was indeed hard for him, how hard they had scarcely realised until they saw him push back the hair from his brow and lift a white and haggard face a moment heavenwards, as if in one swift instant's protest against so cruel a stroke of fate.

"If we can do aught, say so, Maister Geoffrey," put in Farmer Dale, rather husky this time from the strong emotion that swelled within his ample breast. Farmer Dale was—nay, we must change the tense, and say had been—what is called a man well-to-do, a man whose "savings" were spoken of as a subject that commands respect from its solidity; a man too with a large family, a possession that was counterbalanced by a thrifty wife, and had therefore not stood in the way of that "laying by for a rainy day" that is ever the path of wisdom. Things were going very hardly with Farmer Dale, and yet, of so large-hearted and generous a nature was the man, that he well-nigh forgot his own inevitable loss in looking at the man upon whose shoulders a terrible responsibility rested, and who at a time of such dire need was deprived of the presence and counsel of the head of the house.

"You can do this," answered Geoffrey Stirling. "Strive to be patient with me when I say that, upon my own authority, my own responsibility, I have ordered the bank to be kept closed as it is now; the door to be unbarred to none, not a rifled lock examined, not a smouldering ember stirred. . . . If justice is to have any chance—if any redress be possible for your wrongs and mine—everything must remain exactly as it was found this morning when Davie first gave the alarm that a robbery had been committed. Standing

here then before you, feeling the weight of your anger and your sorrow pressing as heavily upon myself as upon you, I ask you to give me your endurance and patience ; I ask you to wait ; perhaps the hardest thing any of us can have to do, when the heart is hot within us and we burn to redress the wrongs of those dearest to us ; and yet I ask it at your hands. If you see fit to break into the bank, to satisfy your curiosity as to how the violated sanctuary looks, I cannot hinder you. We should be but a small force arrayed against so many. I am feeble from illness ; Anthony from old age. Davie and Sherrard are but striplings, and Gaylad knows most of you too well to fly at you. The matter then rests in your hands. If you can trust me to act for the best for you all in this emergency, I shall be the debtor of each one of you individually. . . . I shall owe you a debt of gratitude to my dying day. . . ."

In giving his own account subsequently of this part of the day's proceedings Farmer Dale put it thus :

"He wur brave enough wur Maister Geoffrey to stond oop agen things 'till he coom to sayin' how he'd tak' it kind at our hands for to put our trust in him, and possess our moinds i' patience, and then his voice got a kind of a shake in it, same as the church organ afore we got it reetly fettled last Lady Day wur a twelvemonth, and he leant his two hands on t' window-sill, and bowed his head, and seemed fair ready to drop wheer he stood. Ay, but it's a sorry business, neighbours, and mony of us mun carry a light pocket and a heavy heart ower it. Why, they'n say as Gabriel Devenant's gone daft-like wi' the sorrow on't, and Lord knows he'd sorrow enoo along o' that fine madam of his, wi'out such a slap i' the face as this. What dangs me is, what wur the dog Gaylad after as he never giv' tongue wi' such a scurriment goin' on about him? There's the boy Davie, he's another knot hard to rave is Davie. Such a wick chap as he is, fur all he's a bit ill-balanced about the head and shoulders, and him sleepin' in the room where t' keys was kep' and never hearin' nothin' no more than the dead. It's like as if so many boggarts had been at work, that's what it is!"

These sentiments were given utterance to within the hospitable precincts of The Safe Retreat, a public-house of

much respectability, facing into Main Street, but abutting upon the river in the form of a long narrow tea garden running downhill all the way, and dotted here and there by rustic arbours, more or less frequented by spiders, but looked upon as delightful places to spend a summer's afternoon in nevertheless.

Needless to say, The Safe Retreat had reaped a glorious harvest during the day that was now passed. When, indeed, does not mental agitation render the need for refreshment imperative? Among a certain class of the human community, is not thirst the natural outcome of emotion? In truth the feminine population of Becklington were apt to demur to the adjective "safe" as applied to The Retreat; and many a man was glad to take his wife to tea in one of the rustic erections in the back-garden of a summer's evening, as a sort of plea for a kindly toleration of his own frequent appearances in the front-parlour of that seductive hostelry.

On the present occasion certain habitués—men of mark so to speak—were gathered together in that pleasant meeting-place, while a kind of outer fringe of unwonted, or at all events unnoted, guests crowded round the nucleus of talent in the centre. Farmer Dale was listened to with respect. He was—or had been until that morning—a man of substance, a man of influence, of acknowledged probity, and of a conviviality always restrained within proper bounds; he was one whose opinion naturally carried weight, whether on the commonplace subject of the probable yield of the turnip rop, or on some social matter of higher import.

His utterances upon this day's wonderful events are therefore not things to be slighted; but rather pondered upon as likely to contain much seed of profound wisdom and probability. When he had done speaking there was a murmur of assent from the select few, and a response from the outer fringe.

The chief constable's glazed hat had been rescued from among the legs of the populace, and its various indentations smoothed out as far as such treatment was possible by that functionary's better half, but it still presented a battered and dissipated appearance as it reposed upon the bench beside its owner, who now and again gave it a sidelong,

rueful glance. Matthew himself appeared also slightly the worse for his late experiences, and had a bruise about the size of a well-grown ribstone-pippin over his left eye, which unnatural protuberance his wife had securely bound with a checked pocket-handkerchief and a bit of raw beef-steak. Altogether the chief constable presented the appearance of a soldier who had seen some active service, and had suffered thereby both in person and attire.

"You say well, Farmer Dale," said he in his slow manner, refilling his pipe leisurely as he spoke; "the boy Davie has, to use a figure o' speech, bin as heavy as lead upon my mind this while back. 'What was he a'doin'?' says I to myself, over and over again—'what was the boy Davie a-doin' of?'"

"Why nothing—that's the worst of it, that's the wonder of it," replied the farmer, "sleeping like a young pig i' straw; and I'm danged if I know how he did it either, for, as I said afore, he's a wick chap is Davie, and full o' sense too for such a little fellow. Now if it had been that lazy loon, Abel Dibbs," continued the oracle, turning to Jake, who jumped as if a flea had bitten him at the suddenness of the attack, "I'd have said nout, but just loike what you might have looked for, for by all accounts he beats fattest sou i' th' sty for snoozing and snoring, does Abel."

"Ay, that does he," said Jake, rubbing up his hair and mightily smiting his knee to give greater emphasis to his words; he's an Abel as 'ull make a Cain 'o me, one of these days, I know, wi' those aggravatin' ways o' his'n; but I'm o' your way o' thinkin', Farmer Dale, about the boy Davie. He's a wonderment all through, that's what it is. And then there's the dog Gaylad. I've heard tell that he sleeps stretched across Davie's feet. Summat must ha' bewitched the two on 'em, and made 'em deaf as adders, and heavy-headed as Softie there when he lies down i' the ditch on's way home, and takes it for an honest truckle-bedstead. Whoy, I've heard tell as he's bin known to turn round—and him all among the duck-weed and jacky-sharps—and holler out to's missus to know what toime it wur!"

Their hearts are sad within them, but there is a laugh at this, and Softie—a chuckle-headed fellow, who apparently owns no other name, laughs among the rest: the more

heartily, indeed, since he has never owned a spare shilling in his life, and, having nothing to lose, is none the worse for the day's events—rather the better, indeed, several people having "treated" him in that generous spirit which is often the outcome of wide-spread agitation and excitement.

Any other cobbler than Jake, and any other fool than Softie, would have been out of place in the select inner circle of the gathering at The Safe Retreat; but both individuals were Becklington notabilities, each in his several way. Therefore was Softie tolerated and Jake listened to by such men as Farmer Dale and Matthew Hawthorne, constable-in-chief.

Having had the laugh with him in the matter last under discussion, Jake, spurred to greater efforts by social success (as is the way with most of us) again took up the parable.

"I'm minded, too, to think, neighbours," he said with a knowing air, as of one whose habit it was to dig deep down and to get at the root of things, "that there stands no man in Becklington, or out of it, to be more pitied this day than Maister Geoffrey; and him only rose, as one may put it, straight off a sick bed, which anyone may see by t' looks on him. All the 'sponsibilities is a-weighin' on him, the senior being absent, and mighty things, which no man could foresee, comin' to pass. When first my eyes lighted on him, the voice within me said, 'Jake, my brave fellow, as sure as one day you shall walk in glory——'"

But here Jake was tripped up, and learnt that social success is at all times an uncertain and slippery eminence.

"What's that inner voice o' thine bin up to now, Jake?" said Amos Callender, who came dropping in at the moment, promptly made way for by the outer fringe, and taking a place alongside Farmer Dale. "Have a care what it leads you on to. It seems a flatterin' kind of a voice, and flatterers is mostly liars. Have a care, neighbour—have a care! 'With the flatterer are busy mockers,' so Scripture tells us, and that voice o' thine is too fair-spoken, too full of 'brave fellows,' and 'good fellows,' and such loike, to be altogether trusted in. If it were to tak' to remindin' yo' as we're all nobbut poor perishin' worms, yo' among the rest, I'd think better of it. If yo' come to that," continued the

worthy tanner, upon whose temper the day's work had told considerably; "how does thee know thee'lt ever walk in glory at all?"

Jake, who had nothing but the inner voice to fall back upon by way of testimony, looked rather blank, nor was his discomposure lessened by Matthew Hawthorne (who ofttimes took too much upon himself by reason of his office, in the opinion of some people) cutting in in personal and exceedingly unpleasant manner; in fact, touching upon a tender point.

"If so be as thou dost come to such promotion, Jake," said he—still bearing a grudge against the universe generally in the matter of that battered hat of his, and glad to vent his spleen upon any subject that chanced to present itself—"I'm trusting the Lord 'ull do summat for those legs o' thine, or thou'lt cut but a poor figure, lad, along o' the rest on 'em for sure!"

Farmer Dale burst into one of his loud guffaws at this, and the sight of Jake's face, which looked for all the world as if he'd got a sudden squeeze of lemon in his mouth; and things might have got rather hot but for Amos Callender, whose good heart misgave him for having set the ball going and brought poor Jake to sorrow.

"Never you mind, neighbour," he said, giving the little cobbler a slap on the back hearty enough to have knocked him over if he hadn't been securely seated; "a man's legs be's of no account at all, if so be as his heart's i' the right place. We're told i' the Book that the Lord delighteth not in any man's legs, but 'loveth a cheerful giver'? And didna' I hear tell of a' thou didst for the widow and fatherless this day? So, say no more, neighbour—say no more. I'm a bit cross-grained to-night, and that's all about it. It's thinking o' that lass o' mine, and the savin's I thought to mak' a lady of her wi', and them no more account than the grass as is cut down and cast i' the oven, as the sayin' goes. It's that as set me on thrapin' at that inner voice o' thine. But bear no malice, Jake—bear no malice."

At this the chief constable—great men are but human, after all—thawed too, and nodded at the object of all these comments, as much as to convey a comforting hope that weakly legs—and rather knock-kneed legs too, if truth must

be told—were by no means to be looked upon as hindrances to an ultimate glorified condition. So once more the bank robbery, the "bewitchment" of the boy Davie and the dog Gaylad, the abject despair of old Anthony Geddes, the rage of the senior partner when he should learn the dread and terrible news even now on its way to him, the unexpected advent of a Bow Street runner in their midst, the probable discovery of the criminal or criminals concerned in consequence of such a mighty arm of the law being stretched out to hunt down and pounce upon the same—all these topics, and many akin to them, kept tongues going at The Safe Retreat up to an hour unwontedly late.

Then, still full of speculation, of wonder, and of fear, the party broke up, went out into the quiet autumn night, and, as by one consent, wandered towards the market-place.

Like a dead man, whom no clamour can awaken, the bank showed its closed and shuttered windows, like blind unseeing eyes, to the brooding night, even as it had done to sunlit hours of the day that was past.

Pacing slowly to and fro before the passage that led to the lurking door, was a watchman, clothed in what appeared to be an endless succession of capes one above another, so that his width became abnormal, and, he being a short man, entirely disproportioned to his height.

He carried a lantern in his hand, and was assiduous in flashing it upon every object within reach; but the moon outshone its light, making its beam look no more than a sort of magnified and exceedingly active glowworm.

Even the old stones of the market-place seemed a silver pavement in the lovely radiance of the Queen of Night, and the ivy leaves about the chimney were silver too.

All at once a figure black and sinister, stole out from the shadow—a figure in a slouched hat and long drooping cloak—a figure that, standing a moment in the centre of a patch of light, raised high its clasped hands in one supreme gesture of despair, and then passed on with drooping head, while the sound of a sobbing moan made the group on the further side of the pavement fall back a pace or two.

Said Jake, clutching the tanner convulsively, "It's Gabriel Devenant, poor chap!"

To which the latter, drawing a long breath, replied: "He

had never much to boast of by way of a head-piece, and this blow has broke clean through what roofing there was. Lord be wi' him, for a sorry fellow this night as needs comfort sorely!"

"Amen," said Jake, and he meant the aspiration to do double duty, for he thought of the widow whose "little all" was lost, and of the tears she might be shedding even then, over the "three soles and the patch," lying sleeping in their little beds.

"Nay, though," thought Jake, by way of amendment to this mental picture, "'patch' wunna be sleeping; he'll be keeping watch with the mother, I'll go bail—aye, that will he—and trying his best to comfort her, too."

Just as our little group was breaking up—for Amos saw a light glimmering in the gable, and knew that Bess was keeping vigil—and Jake, catching a gleam through the chink of the shop shutter, felt an inward conviction that the boy Abel, in the scantiest attire, was at some game of unlawful delight—a sad lugubrious plaint broke upon the ear of night.

"Yon's Gaylad," said Matthew, "he's bayin' t'mune—dogs canna abide t'mune."

"Nay, nay," said Farmer Dale, cramming his hat firmer on his head, preparatory to setting out home at a good round pace; "taint t' moon as the creetur's bayin' at. He's keenin' over the wrong done this day. I tell thee, lad, them dumb beasts know a deal more nor anyone as hasn't made a stoody on 'em moight be apt to fancy."

And truly it seemed as if the farmer were right; for, though a sudden cloud had come over the moon, and the stones in the market-place became common-place paving-stones in lieu of a silver pavement, though the ivy leaves showed grey and dead, and the watchman's lanthorn became as a "light to rule the night," the last sound that caught his ear, as he reached the end of the street and struck out into the fields, was the keening of a dog who had been—so said the wiseacres—bewitched into unfaithfulness, and a slug-gardly disloyalty to his trust.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ANGEL ON THE THRESHOLD.

The moonlight that shone so sweet and fair on Becklington market-place, paving it with silver, touched also into unreal and fair beauty the pine trees that gathered round the White House, a many-gabled, ivy-mantled building that ought surely to have been called the Green House instead, for rose, and clematis, and wisteria had so wrought about its walls a dainty broidered robe of leaf and flower, that they were hardly visible except very high up in the pointed gables, where the white might be seen crossed by heavy black beams after a pretty picturesque fashion then more general than now.

The White House was no pretentious mansion; its highest ambition may be said to have been comfort, combined with a well wooded garden; through which ran the beautiful changeful river.

It stood about the space of two miles from the town, counting by the road; and half-a-mile or so less by the river, which in its turnings cut off an angle.

The garden lay to the road; from the back of the house a slope of green led to the river, ending in a light rail and a gateway, where, chained to a stump, a little white boat rested on the bosom of the water, bobbing lazily up and down, as if it were being for ever rocked to sleep.

Here in summer-time were rich store of yellow iris to be found, rearing golden heads from amid blue-green flags, and showing, ever so far down, faint golden reflections like flecks of sunshine. Forget-me-nots, too, lurked by the water's edge, almost touching the ripples as they passed.

Such was the home of Geoffrey Stirling.

There, in the years that were past, had fair flowers of hope, fair dreams of joy, budded but to fade; decay forerunning fruition. There a man had learnt that life was not, for him, fated to be a realisation of passionate desires, but rather a lesson of self-discipline and repression.

He grew habituated to the voice of complaining and discontent, to the constant repetition of self-pitying lamenta-

tion ; a kind of domestic dropping water well calculated to wear away the sternest powers of endurance.

This home of his, in which he did all these things, was a pretty cosy nest of a place. In its garden were neither squares and ovals, nor yet long narrow lines of massed flowers all one colour, as is the mode in this our day ; rather did each plant grow at its own sweet will, and Nature, that gardener on so vast a scale, who never makes a mistake or brings about a discord of tints, had it all her own way.

"Let 'em gang as they've a mind," Jeremy, the head man, boatman, and general factotum of the White House, used to say, alluding to the shrubs and plants in the long rambling borders : "and they'll make a posy fit for a queen."

So golden-rods, evening primroses, and tapering lupins grew into untidy but picturesque tangles, and the great cabbage roses thrust their pink faces up among the rest ; gigantic posies flourished here and there and everywhere, and Jeremy did just as much, or as little—oftenest the last —as seemed good unto him.

In truth this course of conduct was adopted by most of the servants at the White House, that household spur to energy, the overlooking eye of a mistress, being a thing that the domestic kingdom lacked. How can any woman be for ever dwelling upon this ailment, or that fancy, or the other, and yet look well to the cares of her household ?

Dr. Turtle, coming down the winding gravel sweep that led from the house to the road, had oftentimes been seen to shake his head, inhale an immense long-drawn pinch of snuff, and then shake his head again.

He had an idea that if the house chanced to take fire, and Madam Geoffrey had to jump up off her couch and run for her life, it would do her good, but was both too politic and too polite to say so.

When he sometimes looked in of a summer's evening and saw the home master, tired with his day's work in the counting-house, lying back in his chair, with little Ralph squatting on a stool by his side, ever so quiet, over a picture book, but yet with loving watchful eyes, observant of the dark weary face of the father he loved with such a strange unchildlike passion of great tenderness, the doctor would inspire from the silver-lidded box again, thinking the while

that the domestic music at the White House had too much of the duet and too little of the trio about it.

These thoughts also the astute and delicate physician kept locked in the casket of his own bosom, he being of that type of man of healing who think a great deal about their patients, and say very little—to other people.

He was not a particular favourite with Mrs. Geoffrey. She said he had no "power of sympathy," and occasionally a sharpness of manner that was irritating to the patient and apt to raise the pulse and cause palpitation.

That so urbane—not to say pompous—a person as Dr. Turtle could now and again be betrayed into a passing abruptness of manner spoke volumes for the provocation received, and also said much for the lady's husband, who, to use Nurse Prettyman's own words, "was as kind and tender to the poor mistress as if she were a sick lamb, and him the shepherd o' the flock."

Nurse Prettyman was a person of consequence at the White House. She it was to whom Master Ralph flew for comfort in his baby-troubles. It was her hand that placed a "bowpot" on the table in the master's room, because he loved to have flowers about him; her care that watched over and nursed him when, on rare occasions, he fell ill.

If the right person will not do things, then someone else must; and the someone else who did most things at the White House was Nurse Prettyman.

She was a buxom motherly woman, well on in what is called middle age. She was knowledgable in the art of knitting—indeed, it was supposed that in the delicate operation of "turning a heel" she had no equal.

She always wore a small sheath buckled to her left side, and in this sheath one knitting-pin was wont to rest, while the other went click, click against it, and the stocking grew.

Nurse Prettyman would walk about the garden scolding Jeremy, knitting all the time; she would watch little Ralph at play, and all the time those busy shining pins be never still. The child looked upon them and their results as integral parts of her individuality, as if his dear old nurse was a kind of tree whose natural fruit was stockings and comforters, and all such like useful gear.

Mrs. Prettyman had a comely, sonsie face, rosy-cheeked and grey-eyed; she wore a great mob-cap, and a garment called a tippet over her ample shoulders; treated her mistress like a spoilt child; made a young idol of "Master Ralph," and looked to the master's comfort in a hundred little ways that perhaps he would only have become conscious of had he missed them.

It was this worthy and invaluable woman who, on the morning of that eventful day we have already chronicled, tapped softly at Geoffrey Stirling's door, to say that a messenger had come from the bank in hot haste, and laden with an urgent message to be delivered to his ear alone; had knocked again more loudly, and then, receiving no answer, ventured in, to find him sleeping with his head upon his arm, and a tired white face turned to the light from the window, that was shining full upon him, yet had not broken in upon his slumber—the heavy dreamless rest of one who has been ill and is reaching convalescence.

"What is it?" he said, slowly opening his dark eyes upon the figure by his bed. "Is your mistress worse?" As the words passed his lips he grew all alert, sitting up quickly and pushing back the tangled grey-lined locks from his brow.

Throughout all that day did Nurse Prettyman at intervals bemoan herself in that she had had to rouse her master from that sweet refreshing sleep—"a better one than all the medicines in Dr. Turtle's surgery for a man as weak as water, and little fit to be worrited about business and such-like," said the dame, tossing her head in scornful defiance of all bank clerks and messengers, with Anthony Geddes at the head of them.

As to Mrs. Geoffrey, no sooner did she understand that something was amiss than she went into strong hysterics, had the blind in her room lowered, and ordered a dish of white wine whey to be prepared without delay — that condiment being supposed to be a "supporting" kind of thing.

"Why, if the master was dead you couldn't take on worse," said Nurse Prettyman; "and there's Master Ralph half frightened out of his little senses."

The child, with great grave eyes—eyes like and yet unlike

his father's—was watching his mother, and wondering what was the trouble she raved of—the trouble that had fallen on the head of his father, and caused him to look so strange, and forget to kiss his boy, as he drove off in the gig, hardly giving poor Jeremy time to scramble up behind.

Only seven years of life, all told, had passed over Ralph's curly pate, but that strange and close companionship between himself and his father, of which mention has already been made, together with the fact of being an only child, had made him over-thoughtful for his age, like a fruit that ripens before its time in artificial warmth. He was such a wonderfully helpful little fellow, too! One would almost have thought, watching him, that with his tiny hands he was trying to help his father bear the burden of life, as he had to bear it, weighted with a foolish woman's selfish fancies.

The child, too, had a certain pride in his mother's faded prettiness that was a reflex of his father's gentle bearing towards her.

"Daddy and I have to take care of you, you know, mamma," he would say with a wise and wistful look upon his lovely face, recognising the close partnership in responsibility that is the outcome of a great love.

In like fashion, this new trouble, whatever it was, pressed upon Ralph as well as on his sire.

The child wandered about disconsolate. He did not care to see the pigeons fed, though he saw cook passing into the yard with a shallow basket of corn upon her arm; he did not care to play with the tawny setter-pup, who came blundering along on soft yellow paws many sizes too big for him, and even lay down on his back in the grass, with all the four of them in air, to attract his young master' attention.

Something was wrong with father; something worse even than being ill, and lying still with Ralph sitting quite, quite still beside him in case he might want anything; what then did it signify whether the pigeons had their dinner or not, and why did the pup want to romp and play just as if nothing was the matter?

When father came home, much later than usual, and looking, oh, so pale and wearied!—Dr. Turtle came with him. Ralph, from the ambush of the squat dark oak balus-

trades that ran across the nursery landing, saw them come in together. He heard the doctor say, twice over, "Now, my dear sir; now, my very dear sir," saw him take a huge pinch of snuff, and then the library door shut upon the pair. Presently arrived the vicar of the square-towered church in the Meadows, a personage whom Master Ralph, with the calm daring irreverence of childhood, looked upon as one to be held in estimation because he owned the rookery behind the church; that delightful group of tall giant firs, wherein were nests innumerable, and young rooks, ever clamorous for food. The vicar had been away for the Sunday, returning late on Monday evening to find all Becklington in an uproar. No wonder then that his kindly face wore a look of grave concern. After him, in a violent hurry, and wiping his forehead with a big red handkerchief, came Sir Roland Ashby, of Dale End, together with his son; this last a personage whom Ralph had once seen coming out of his father's room looking very odd, and either as if he were just going to cry or had been crying, the boy couldn't tell which.

Then came the sound of many voices through closed doors, Sir Roland Ashby's louder than the rest. Ralph thought he seemed to be scolding somebody very hard indeed, his son perhaps. Nurse Prettyman had said one day to herself when the young heir to Dale End was riding by on his swift grey mare, that he was "a bad fellow." Maybe he had been bad now, and that was why the squire was bawling so. Anyway, Ralph thought, the squire's son was a fine sight to see, with his fair florid locks and fine beaver hat curled up at the sides, with his tight pantaloons and long-skirted coat, and the jewel that shone like a star in his satin cravat—even if he was naughty sometimes. It seemed too as if Sir Roland was determined to be very severe upon this particular occasion, for Ralph heard him bellow forth a resolve to have somebody "shot," and "see if he didn't—sharp's the word too," and who could it be except the wearer of the curly brimmed hat and gleaming breast-pin? Ralph thought Sir Roland was a very cruel old man, and drew quite a long sigh over the matter, so impressed was he; but this and all else was quickly driven from his mind when he crept downstairs—unnoticed for a wonder in

the household—and out into the stable-yard where Jeremy Bindwhistle was telling the story of the day's events to a select audience, and bringing himself so often into the narrative that it began to appear as though the whole population of Becklington had, to a man, turned to him for consolation and guidance in their perplexity.

"You're like a man who tells folk to pass through a gate, and stands there all the time, blocking up the way so as ne'er a one can pass," said Nurse Prettyman, giving a hitch to the pin that rested in the sheath, and keeping the other going, though she never glanced at it; a feat that was supposed to have something a bit uncanny about it by the underlings at the White House. "It's Jeremy this and Jeremy that until a body would fain think there wasn't a man in all Becklington wi' a spark of sense in him except Jeremy Bindwhistle. It's other folk we want to hear about, man."

So Jeremy took up the cruelly-broken thread of his narrative again, but not with the same unctuous gusto as heretofore. He kept stumbing over himself, as if he were a stone in his own pathway, but under the fixed stare of Mrs. Prettyman's eye passed by all such impediments hurriedly, and made tolerable headway considering.

He told of the tears that fell like rain adown the poor old withered cheeks of Anthony Geddes; how he went staggering about from one open empty safe to another; fingered the rifled locks; bent above the smouldering heap that had once been his cherished ledgers; how the boy Davie scarce once took his eyes off the master, and how Gaylad, the red spaniel with golden-brown eyes and feathered legs and tail, whom every visitor to Becklington Bank knew as well as the manager himself, kept shoving his cold nose first into this hand, then into that, but always returned to crouch at the master's feet, looking up gravely and wistfully at the white troubled face of the man upon whose devoted head such awful sorrow had fallen, swift and unlooked-for as the lightning's flash.

"Eh, but he's a clever beast, is Gaylad; he's more knowledgable than mony a Christian, and if the Lord would but be as gracious and merciful to him as He was to Balaam's ass i' the days when wonders did abound, folk's yeds might be

less apt to brast wi' puzzlement than now appears the likely dispensation," said Jeremy, slipping in his metaphor hastily, for fear of discouragement, and permitting a feeble smirk of self-complacency to see the day.

He need not have been afraid for the safety of those flowers of eloquence on which he prided himself. Nurse Prettyman was too far gone in troubled amaze to have it left in her to throw metaphorical cold water upon anyone. Her knitting-pins were still, and the rosy colour in her plump cheeks had faded several shades.

"Go on," she said, speaking under her breath; "what more hast thee to tell?"

Jeremy had a good deal to tell: How, "so 'twas said," Maister Gabriel Devenant had gone "out of 's yed." How Betsy, Amos Callender's good wife, had had to hide away her husband's razor; and how Farmer Dale "kep' a stout heart," though, as everyone knew, all his savings were at stake.

At this stage of the narrative the interest deepened, if that were possible, for now the eager listeners (comprising by this time even the stable-boy who lurked in the background, hoping that Jeremy wouldn't see him, but listened with all his ears nevertheless) heard of the rage and riot in the motley crowd; of hands lifted to fling stones at the windows of Stirling's Bank; of "the master, looking fit to drop, as well might be, and him so sick these many days." But brave, too, facing the lot of them, and asking them—praying them—to have patience, and to wait.

"They'd ha' bin hard-hearted ones, too, if they hadna' gi' un his way, for he spoke so gentle-like, so confidin' as you moight say, and so sorrowfu' like——"

But here occurred an unlooked-for interruption to Jeremy's stream of rhetoric. Little Ralph, whose dark eyes had been fixed upon the speaker from the shelter of the doorway with its over-arching roof of green trellis and scarlet runners, suddenly made a rush at Nurse Prettyman, burying his face in the folds of her dress, and, shaking from head to foot with passionate yet restrained sobs, cried out "not to tell it any more," he "could not bear to hear of all those people being so sad and sorry, and, if his dearest dad——"

Ralph could get no more words out, for the sobs choked

them back, and Nurse Prettyman, catching up her nursling in her arms, bore him off, casting a fierce and wrathful glance across his prone head at Jeremy in going; as if he, poor man, were at the bottom of the mischief. Jeremy, crestfallen and amazed at his own discomfiture, began to bite his nails, at which ravishing spectacle the stable-boy's spirit uprose within him, finding voice in gibes.

"Thou got a nasty faa' that toime," said he, all one gleeful grin; "that cooms o' bein' so set 'oop wi' sound o' thee own clapper."

"How could I tell t' little 'un was hid amang t' bean-stalks?" pleaded Jeremy, aggrieved; "and wasn't it Mistress Prettyman, her own self, as set me on? Dang such shifty ways, say I!"

"Dang what thee hast a moind," rejoined the rebellious one, "but thee got a nasty faa'."

Then he went to bedding down the mare, whistling at his work as one who is glad at heart.

Meanwhile that tender shepherdess, Mistress Prettyman, carried her bleating lamb upstairs, showering down kisses and terms of lovingest endearment as thick as rain upon the dark curls huddled against her shoulder; and little Ralph took comfort at last, or seemed to do so. At all events the sobs ceased to shake him, only an odd straggler coming now and again to the fore, like the lagging drops of a storm that is past. True, the child was very silent, and sat in the low embrasure of the nursery-window with his chin on his hand like a little old man, watching the rooks fly cawing across the dappled sky towards their home, the rookery; watching the sun's last rays kiss the pretty shining river good-night, and listening to robin keening with his sad sweet evening song over the falling of the leaves the coming death of the flowers.

But then Ralph was never a talkative child at the best of times; he had spent too much of his short life in his mother's shaded room, and been told too often to make no noise, but just be still and good "because mamma's head was bad," to grow into a romping, laughing boy, full of fun and mischief, as are many of his age, The lesson of self-constraint had been taught him with his alphabet: the lesson of an exquisite capability of sympathy by the passionate

love he bore his father. And so it came about that while seeming to watch the rooks and the sun's good-night, and little robin jerking his scarlet breast from side to side among the branches the better to emphasize his song, Ralph was thinking of the story Jeremy had told of poor Gabriel Devenant, and Farmer Dale, and many others who had had their money stolen away by some wicked thief.

Perhaps, thought the child, it was that wicked thief whom the squire wanted to have shot when he should be caught; and not the naughty beautiful fellow with the yellow hair and the shining star in his breast after all. Perhaps then also, the squire was not cruel but only just, and one ought to like him, though he had such a red face, and roared when he spoke.

Ralph was a righteous little soul, and he wished to be fair to everyone, even to the squire, who was ugly to look at, and unpleasant to listen to.

Ralph never went downstairs when his father and mother were at their evening meal. Mrs. Geoffrey could not eat if she were worried, and besides was usually a good deal fatigued with the labours of the toilette. The poor lady hardly ever rose before the day began to wane, but she loved her own faded beauty, and liked to be made to look nice for the evening hours, and to be told that she was still a lovely woman. She craved this sort of mental food from any hand; some foolish gossip looking in upon the banker's sickly wife to pass the hour away, who, having paid her dole of flattery went away and lamented to others over the sad fate of Geoffrey Stirling in being tied to such a useless, fanciful wife; or the servant who brushed out her long fine tresses; it was all the same. Flattery was the fruit Mrs. Geoffrey had a relish for, and she cared not what tree it grew upon. She even loved to hear little Ralph call her his "pretty mamma," as indeed he often did, and in years to come, when she was nothing but a faint and far-off memory, recalled her still by the old name that she had loved.

Later on then, when the evening meal was over, it was the custom for Ralph to go down stairs to the library. First Mrs. Prettyman brushed the square-cut locks tidily over his brow, and combed out the long curls that fell upon his shoulders. Then he donned a pretty little dress of dark

velvet and a lace collar, fine and deep; put on rosetted shoes and softly betook his small personality down the low broad stairs, never failing to touch one favourite goblin carved in the dim old oaken bannisters as he passed.

On such occasions Mrs. Prettyman was wont to say to any one who might be handy, that Master Ralph was a sight "good for sore eyes," but the better truth was that he was a sight good for any eyes at all, and in those of his father seemed the fairest bud—one day, please Heaven to blossom into loveliest flower of maturity—in all the garden of his heart.

On this occasion the child betook himself to the library with all the thoughts of the past hour garnered in his mind. It had grown dark, and the candles, too, in bronze sconces one on either side the high and narrow mantel-shelf, were lighted.

Between them hung a circular mirror supported by gilt chains passed through the beak of a gilt eagle. Ralph thought this mirror very beautiful, likening it in his childish fancy to a great round shining eye, watching everything that went on in the room, and reflecting them in miniature-like little pictures. All round this room ran panelling of oak breast-high; the mantelshelf was of oak, too, and carved all over with griffins and goblins that were evidently nearly related to Ralph's particular friend upon the stairs. The autumn nights were now chill, and a small wood fire burnt cheerily in the low grate, between the dogs of twisted brass on either side. As Ralph entered, his father, who was warming his hands at the blaze, turned to greet him, and the child was so filled with sorest grief to see him so pale and wan, that in one bound he was in his arms, with his hands knit about his neck.

Mrs. Geoffrey stirred uneasily upon her couch, that stretched from the low broad casement window to the fire-side, and put her hand to her brow.

"Hush!" said her husband, catching the well-known domestic signal, and answering to it promptly. "Mamma's head is bad to-night, Ralph."

Then he gathered his little son between his knees, smoothed down the soft locks upon his forehead, and gently touched the curls that hung about his shoulders.

"Mamma," whose head was bad—when was it not bad?—was a pale and graceful figure seen in the mellow light of mingled fire and candle.

She had been gently and pleasantly excited by the coming of so many visitors an hour ago. The squire had paid her a brazen compliment or two in his own thundering style. His son had once more impressed her as a man of elegance and fashion. She was glad she had dressed a little earlier than usual, and so been able to receive them. The result of these pleasant facts was a faint pink flush on either cheek, that had not yet died away. She wore a flowing dress open at the throat, with high frill standing up, and a fine white lace kerchief crossed over her bosom; the sleeves of this gown were full from shoulder to elbow, fitting tightly from thence to the wrist; her hair, fair and rippling, was twisted about a delicately carved comb, and trained into endless curls piled over either temple.

As a design for the lid of an ornamental box, as a fashion-plate in a magazine of the latest modes, Mrs. Geoffrey would have been perfect. As a woman able to be a true help-meet to a man, able to meet the day of trouble with him and for him with a brave heart, and to give comfort when comfort was needed, she might be looked upon as a failure.

"Father," said Ralph suddenly, laying his two small hands upon his father's shoulders, and looking earnestly up into his face; "do you think they will catch him? Do you think they will catch the wicked thief who has made all the poor people sad and sorry?"

"Who has been talking to the child of these things," said Mr. Stirling, putting Ralph aside with a momentary hot irritation of manner.

"I dare say it is Prettyman," said his wife. "Besides, Ralph saw me when I was very sadly upset—prostrate, indeed, you may say—this morning. I fear, Geoffrey, that I shall feel the effects of the shock for quite a long time. I was sorry not to get a quiet word with Dr. Turtle this evening; but that is the way with you men; once business matters take hold of you, you have no attention for anything else—you become selfishly absorbed at once. I have always noticed this to be so."

Ralph's question was still unanswered, but he did not repeat it.

He moved quietly to one side of the fire-place, and set to warm his hands at the blazing pine-knots, looking ridiculously like a miniature of his father as he did so.

Geoffrey Stirling had risen, and was standing leaning one arm upon the mantel-shelf, and his head upon his hand.

Looking up, Ralph saw that shapely hand tremble, saw the dark eyes full of troubled thought, bent upon the fire.

"Daddy is as sorry as I am for those poor people," thought the child; "but he does not like to speak about it."

For a wonder—a wonder, indeed, almost without precedent in the annals of the White House—it struck Mrs. Geoffrey that her husband looked both ill and troubled.

She rose from the languidly reclining position that was habitual to her, came to his side, and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Geoffrey," she said, "I wouldn't worry myself too much about all this if I were you. I daresay it will come all right in the end, and, you know, doctors say that worry is at the bottom of half the complaints that exist. If I had taken to worrying about things, I should have been in my grave long since."

He was very gentle with her; very grateful for her unwonted thought of him; sympathetic, too, when she declared herself, half an hour later, "completely shattered" by the day's worries, and obliged to retire to her chamber there to have duly administered to her five-and-twenty drops of camphor julep without delay.

Meanwhile little Ralph had stolen quietly upstairs, forgetting even to touch the friendly griffin on the way,—so sad was he.

In all the sweet experience of the years that went to the making up of his young life, when could he remember his father putting him aside, speaking with such a sudden change of look and voice, as he had done to-night?

Never—never; and now what should he do?

Disconsolate, the child crept into the embrasure of the nursery window, that favourite post of 'vantage, and to him

there, as the old plays have it, came the setter-pup staggering on uncertain legs, scrambling on his knees, crawling up his breast, and finally thrusting a small cold nose into his neck.

Thus Nurse Prettyman found the pair of them, the round tawny head of the pup wet with his master's tears.

Being a woman of prompt action, she despatched the one to his basket in the corner of the wood-cupboard, the other to his bed.

"Be very kind to him," said the child, handing over the little dog to Nurse Prettyman's tender mercies; "he has been trying to comfort me."

"But whatever's been and vexed you now, Master Ralph?" said the good woman, looking at the wet dark eyes in some amaze.

"I do not wish to tell any one," replied the boy with a dignity wonderful in one of so few inches.

And Mrs. Prettyman dare not ask any further questions. That was the way with Master Ralph; he had a trick of the hand and a set of the head when he was pleased to be a bit wilful that was his father over again, and which none cared to gainsay.

The terrible eventful day was over, and Geoffrey Stirling kept solitary vigil. Up and down, up and down the library he paced, his arms folded across his breast, his head thrown back, the hair tossed from his brow, his eyes gazing fixedly and defiantly at—what?

Thoughts that were as phantoms—thin air taking tangible form and shape. With these he wrestled as Jacob with the angel.

But Geoffrey Stirling's ghostly foes were not of heavenly origin; rather were they akin to the goblin-forms that grinned and mowed at him from the carved mantel as the firelight glinted on them, gifting distended lip and globular eye with life and movement.

Up and down, up and down paced the restless feet, weary conflict raging in the heart that beat so heavily in Geoffrey Stirling's breast.

All at once he stopped short, and drawing a long deep breath, leant against the lintel of the curtained window.

What ailed him?

A sharp, quick shudder passed through his frame—the sort of deadly thrill that superstition tells us we feel when some careless foot steps above the plot of ground destined to be our last earthly resting place.

His eyes seemed to sink in their hollow orbits; the furrows in his face deepened.

Some terrible, some sinister influence was about him, near him, wrapping him round as closely as the air he breathed.

Was it the room or the night itself that felt so stifling?

With shaking hand he pulled back the curtain, laying half of the diamond-paned casement bare.

His fingers had closed on the latch; he was about to try and breathe the pure fresh air of heaven, when, with a strangled cry, he fell back, grasping the curtain convulsively, and with staring eyes fixed on the dull glass.

What had he seen there as he bent to the catch of the window?

A white face, almost touching the pane—a pair of sombre menacing eyes, dark and full of fire, staring back into his own.

"It was a trick of fancy—a mere trick," he gasped at last, passing his hand across his brow, where the beads of sweat stood dank and thick. "The strain of such a day as this would have unnerved any man, any man—however strong."

He pushed open the casement, fastened the hook in its stanchion. It seemed to him, as he did so, that a shadow passed quickly between him and the moonlight, and was lost among the trees. But this, too, was surely but the phantom of an over-wrought brain, for when he looked again there was nothing but the silvered grass, the wealth of gently-stirring branches tipped with radiance, and the faint far sound of the water sobbing against the boat by the gate-way. God's peace seemed to be over all the sleeping world, and shortly from the old square tower of Becklington Church rang out twelve slow mellow strokes, each one vibrating and then dying on the quiet air.

Was that midnight chime the signal for some heavenly messenger, with angel face and tender pitiful eyes, to bring rest and peace to the troubled heart of the solitary watcher?

What was the white-robed visitant standing at the door, that had opened slowly, as if pushed by a timid and uncertain hand?

Was it in truth some unlooked-for supernatural guest, stealing thus unawares upon Geoffrey Stirling's solitude?

Or was it only little Ralph, the white night-dress that fell to his feet gathered in one hand lest he should stumble, his curls floating on his shoulders, and a small white troubled face raised pleadingly?

At the sound of the door opening Geoffrey Stirling had started and turned, for a moment drawing in his breath sharply between his teeth, and staring at the child with fixed incredulous stare from under his knitted brows.

Then, with that swift sweet smile that ever chased all trace of sternness from lip and eye, he held out his hand.

"Ralph, my boy," he said, drawing him tenderly to his side, and forgetting for a time—or so it seemed—the strangeness of the child's appearance there at such an hour.

Was it the wraith of his own innocent childish days that the man watched so dreamily? Was it the fair presentment of himself as he had been long years ago, when he learnt to pray at his mother's knee.

Ralph, troubled and awed by the strange steadfast gaze of the eyes looking into his, trembled, afraid of he know not what.

"Mon père," he said, softly (it was a pretty trick of speech his father had taught him), "are you angry with me still?"

"Angry! Not I, my darling," replied Geoffrey, passing his hands across his eyes as one might do awaking from a dream. "But how comes Ralph to be wandering about like a little ghost at this time of night—eh? What will Nurse Prettyman say?"

"I don't know," said the child, with a quaint air of regal indifference to that worthy woman's feeling in the matter. "I wanted to come to you and I came. I could not sleep. I was all the time thinking of those poor people, so sad and sorry, and with no money to buy any bread. You are not angry now, so I may say it—mayn't I? And see—I want you to take this, daddy. It is my very own, you know, so I can do what I like with it—can't I?—and I don't care

about saving up for a watch any more. I want you to give it to them, and to say how sorry little Ralph is, and that he sent it. See, here it is."

Ralph had slipped one hand round his father's neck. The other he held up before him, and there, in a little pink palm, lay a golden coin—all his store.

CHAPTER V.

A LOVE SONG.

As a lark at early morning, so sang the child Hilda, sitting at her work in the sunshine.

> "Love is not a feeling to pass away
> Like the balmy breath of a summer's day;
> It is not—it cannot be—laid aside,
> It is not a thing to forget or hide—
> It clings to the heart—ah! woe is me!
> As the ivy clings to the old oak tree."

A quaint song truly to be sung by a maiden of such tender years, "quite six now," as she was wont to say with a charming air of complacency at being able to lay claim to so much; and who could forbear a smile at the precocious pathos with which the last two lines were given?

Surely the little rogue must have been well tutored in that sweet counterfeit of true love's pain and passion—troubles that still lay far, far ahead in her bright young life?

The dolorous lay was sung under difficulties too. The dark blue ribbon which tied back Hilda's sunny hair hardly kept the curling tendrils well in hand, and truants had to be pushed back into an unwilling captivity every five minutes or so. Then, the work upon which the songster was engaged was of such an intricate and responsible character as to require, at critical moments, that rosy lips should be screwed up tight and a bonnie head held well on one side. Hilda's bit of an arm was thrust far into the deep recesses of a black worsted stocking, and there the wee hand

stretched to its utmost to form a frame for that homely kind of needle-work called darning.

Under and over—under and over—went the long needle, of which the little woman who guided it in the way it should go looked the least bit in the world frightened, while a beautiful net-work grew—not without violet eyes casting wistful looks through the casement whence came streaming in a fountain of golden light; not without a big sigh now and again heaving the baby-bodice.

"The path of duty is sweet," had been the last copy in her writing-book and Hilda was in that desirable path at the present time. But for all that she could not help remembering how still and bright would lie the dykes in the sunshine, how charming was the paper-boat she had made with her own deft fingers, and proudly floated there the day before.

The bracken was all turning yellow against the rocks. The nuts in the wood were ruddy outside and delicious within. You had but to jump as high as you could, bring your two hands close together, and—why, there you were, you know, and the nuts too!

What was the good of thinking of nutting in the woods, under the leaves that were all red and yellow, when you ought to be giving all your attention to stocking-mending?

An uneasy hitch of the small three-legged stool on which Hilda was perched was the outward and visible demonstration of this penitent reflection.

Hilda had been reared under a system of repression that would have hardened a nature less naturally sweet and tender. As it was, repression had only saddened the violet eyes and given them a dreamy softness, strange and wonderfully winning to see in one so young. It made you feel that the shadow of a womanhood to come was for ever over the child, tempering the ready smile of her sensitive mouth, though it had not yet stunted those precious tendrils, the warm and loving sympathies of the child-heart.

Some women are born with a tendency to idolatry. They idolise, first, a doll, or something that for lack of a better thing represents a doll; then, in time, lover, husband, children, follow. The passionate votary is never tired of burning sweetest incense at her shrine; she is willing to

spend and be spent, to suffer and keep weary vigil, smiling the while.

Such a nature was folded in that bud, little Hilda's heart. Already an idol was in possession, an idol whose worship was conducted in secret.

But at present Hilda's whole soul is centred on her stocking-mending. The last masterly touches given to a finished work are full of a rapture all their own, and Hilda's web of lattice-work was close on completion.

> "It is not—it cannot be—laid aside,
> It is not a thing to forget or hide—
> It clings to the heart—ah! woe is me!
> As the ivy clings to the old oak-tree . . ."

Again uprose the sound of the pretty love-lorn ditty, but this time the singer held her work out at arm's length and looked at it admiringly with her head on one side, as she sang.

"Don't be singing foolish songs when you're at work, Hilda."

The voice came through the half-open door from a room across the white-stoned passage.

"It helps me, mothie, to sing when I'm working."

"That's nought but a foolish fancy; and the song—where did you learn it?"

"Miss Alicia taught it me, mothie; she said, to stop awhile, you know, and sigh—so——"

"She might have taught you something better while she was about it. If I hear of any more such folly, you sha'n't go to the great house any more this side Christmas."

Hilda shivered, though the sun was shining so merrily through the lattice-panes, and a robin was singing on the bough of the apple-tree ready to burst his crimson vest.

What would the life of any one be who was forbidden to go to Dale End?

The thought was really too stupendous for the mind to grasp.

No delicate touching of the keys of the old spinet, awaking a certain gracious tinkling sound that seemed delicious to her ears; while Miss Alicia stood by, smiling at the player's delight. No half-timid glancing into wonderful

tomes wherein were pictures, fearsome and beautiful, of knights in gay caparison or deadly fight. No stories of the ghost in the blue-chamber; no syllabub in the housekeeper's room. What would life be, shorn of such delights as these and others akin to them?

"I won't sing any more, mothie," said poor Hilda, "if you don't like me to. All the same, I think it's a be—ootiful song, and I love Miss Alicia for teaching it me."

A pretty mutinous pout steals round the baby-lips that thus utter their small protest; but a sharp slap on the side of the golden-brown head nearly capsizes Hilda from her three-legged throne a moment afterwards, and shows her that there is a price to pay for loyalty to the absent.

"Little wilful!" cries Mrs. Devenant, who has hurried across the house-place thus to administer condign punishment.

Hilda doubtless smarts under the blow, but she does not weep, she does not even complain. She tries to baffle fate by ignoring the knocks it bestows.

"When are you going to learn that it is useless to try and get the better of me, with your wheedling ways?" said Mrs. Devenant, standing beside her small daughter, tall, splendid, implacable.

She was only a farmer's daughter; her brother—honest son of toil—had followed his own plough, had had friendly rivalries with his neighbours as to stacking corn and gathering in crops of mangold-wurzels, and was "respected by all who knew him," as the saying goes. He was so much a gentleman at heart as never to boast that his sister Hester had "married above her"; indeed, in his own mind, he thought she had made rather a fool of herself in the matter. He wondered at a man being called by a name that seemed by rights to belong to a higher class of beings; and, glancing furtively at Gabriel Devenant's dark deep-set eyes and wild locks, opined within himself, that, if he claimed kin with an angel at all, it wasn't one of the right sort. Being, however, a man given to mind his land and look upon the proper management of cattle as one of the main ends of existence, the young farmer kept a discreet silence on these delicate points.

Such was Hester Devenant's lineage; and yet she had the

mask of a Roman empress, and the dignity of one born to the purple, when she chose to assume it.

Nothing could well be imagined more perfect than the way in which her head was set upon her shoulders; nothing more lovely than the endless coils of dark hair twisted in a rich mass low on her neck—hair that, when she sat in a chair and let it fall loose, reached to the ground, and lay there a glorious tangle of curls and ripples; none of your limp, lifeless locks, but such tresses as one fancies those with which the repentant Magdalene wiped the Divine feet that were wet with the rain of her tears.

Strangers looked at Gabriel Devenant's wife, and then said what a beautiful woman she might have been. Only "might have been," for in her face was all womanly gentleness lacking; neither sweetness nor peace had there their dwelling-place. It was the face of a woman at war with all the world, at war with all good impulses, even in her own nature—not unfeeling, but with all good-feeling misguided, passionate, aggressive; the eyes dark, defiant, and, above all, suspicious; the nose chiselled finely, and with those upward curving nostrils that are rare, and beautiful as rare; the mouth, cruel, restless, and marring the perfection of all else. Yet those thin nervous lips smiled sometimes; chiefly when Gabriel said something which it pleased his wife to hear, or when she stood by Hilda as the child lay sleeping with a flushed cheek resting on a pretty pink palm, and the will in abeyance that it was the work of her mother's life to twist and bend as she would.

It could not be expected that Mrs. Devenant should be a popular woman. On the contrary, she was a singularly friendless one. Yet she managed to get her own way, as much by fear as others did by love. The people about her feared her bitter tongue, and were cautious how they set it wagging; feared her resentment, and were careful not to arouse it. Few cared to try and cross her will; and yet, underlying her life was a tragedy.

She was not what is called young when she married, being five years her husband's senior, and he had then reached his seven-and-twentieth year. She had never had any rustic flirtations. Never had any village lad ventured on the offering of a Sunday posy, or nudged her with an

amorous elbow, after the fashion of bumpkin lovers. Tall and stately as one of the pine-trees on her father's farm, she grew to fullest womanhood, gaining, not losing, comeliness with every passing year.

Then she met Gabriel Devenant, an artist wandering about the grassy lanes and flower-pied fields in search of "bits" of colour.

That time seemed long ago now; that dear dead time, long since laid in its shroud with decently-covered dead white face; a thing that had been but was not; a dead thing upon whose grave was written no "resurgam."

Hester had loved passionately and madly this slender dark-eyed lover of hers; softened for him as she had softened for none other; become his wife, and then taken the love he bore her into her strong hands, and strangled the life out of it. There it lay, crushed and dead, and out of it grew a terrible thing, holding in itself the very nature of a blight—a thing called toleration.

Hester was jealous of everything her husband loved, of every source of pleasure he found in life that had not its centre in herself. She grew to be the bane and burden of his existence. She was jealous even of his art—in time, jealous of his child. Reproaches and sneers were served up to him with every meal—a pungent sauce little to any man's liking. At last he knew himself to have become that most despicable thing—a husband who is pitied for his home misery, and his submission to a woman's tyranny. He grew reckless. The ambition that had once burnt brightly in his heart died out and became but ashes. He grew moody, fitful, fond of solitary wanderings. His easel was neglected; he muttered to himself as he sat over the fire and rarely smiled, save when little Hilda crept to his knee and nestled her head lovingly against his breast.

Evil days had come upon the farm that was Hester's maiden home. The old farmer died, and, to the amaze of all, the land was found to be heavily encumbered with debt incurred for a drunken scapegrace son, who had been seen at uncertain intervals, hanging about the place—a sorry sight, but had not been supposed to have any influence over his father, and had been looked upon as a mere excrescence on the family tree, to be tolerated or lopped off if it became

a nuisance to any one concerned. Then the younger brother —he who had thought Hester a fool for marrying the half-foreign man with the outlandish name—gathered himself and his tools together, shook the dust off his feet, and betook himself to the New World, together with an honest lass, who, setting a field-poppy to blow in his button-hole one ruddy autumn evening, told him she'd "follow him barefoot round the world," a promise he sealed with a hearty smack of a kiss on lips as red as the poppy itself.

So poverty might have come to Gabriel's quaint little house among the dykes (for, though Hester was the thriftiest of women, what's the use of being thrifty if you've nothing to be thrifty on?), but that an aunt of Mr. Devenant's died, leaving him a patrimony, small in itself, but enough and more than enough for the requirements of that modest household. People said that this stroke of fortune had a bad effect on Gabriel; that, where he had once tried to do a little work, now he did none. His hand, though given to shaking sadly, had not lost all its cunning. His eyes, though often strangely filmy, and apt to waver as they met yours, could still brighten at the sight of a mellow sunset or the glint of sunshine upon a fruit-laden bough, and his pictures found a ready sale with the dealers.

"He might do something," said Becklington, shaking its many heads, and to this the select circle at The Safe Retreat answered,

"Ay, ay; so he moight," taking the pipes from their lips to let the asseveration have way.

Farmer Dale even saw fit to enter upon the subject anatomically and in detail. "He's got a kind of a paralysation over him, has Maister Dev'nant," said that worthy, hitching his right-hand thumb into the arm-hole of his plush waistcoat, and swelling himself out as one who enters upon a matter of which he is master; "a kind of a blight, so to speak, same as Bill Stephens's uncle on the mother's side, him as drags his leg like as if it didna reetly belong to him, and conna count upon what it 'ull do once it's set a-goin' no more than if it wur a threshing-flail. Well, Maister Dev'nant he's summat i' the same way, only he's got it 'i his insoide. It's too much thraping from a woman's tongue as is cause on 't, I reckon; and then he's half a furriner,

which, as I hear, are mostly but a lazy kind o' folk. Still he moight do summat. Bill Stephens's uncle makes shift to rock the craddle for Bill's missus wi' t' leg as he's kep' the whip hand of, that does he. Maister Dev'nant's come o' gentle folk; one can see that wi' half an eye; conna' dig, to beg he is ashamed, as the sayin' goes; and as to paintin' those bits o' signboards as he used to be so busy about, why his hand shakes too much——"

"That's because he's feert o' his missus," put in Softie, speaking unadvisedly.

"Nay," said the farmer with a fat chuckle, "if every one of us as had *that* complaint took to the shivers, there'd be a pretty ditherification among us—we'd be little better than quaking bogs every man and mother's son of us, come Saturday night. And as for you, Softie——"

But Softie had craftily departed, so the meeting returned to the discussion of Gabriel Devenant, and it was unanimously resolved that the man might "do summat."

Apparently Mr. Devenant did not coincide in this resolve. More and more, as time passed on, did he become a mere dreamer, living in a world of fancies, which, to judge by their results, could not have been wholesome mental food.

For all his five years less of life, Gabriel grew to look older, much older, than his handsome wife. Lines deep and haggard marred the somewhat feminine beauty of his features; grey mingled largely with the lank locks that were thrust behind his ears, and then fell loosely on the shabby velvet collar of his coat. His form grew bent, his chest hollow. Wrapped in his favourite out-door garment, a flowing Spanish cloak, and with hat slouched over his eyes, he was in truth a weird and gloomy figure to come unawares upon some small and timid Becklingtonian blackberrying or flower-gathering in the woods.

But there was one whose heart so brimmed over with love for this strange, silent, brooding man, that in that precious chalice was no room for fear—and this was Hilda, his "*petite reine*," his "little maid," his "fairy," his half-a-dozen other pretty names coined of love.

He would steal up to kiss Hilda good-night, and the two in a wordless ecstasy of tenderness would hold each other close, until Hester's clear voice from below came ringingly

to know "why he was keeping the child awake at that time of night?"

Then down dived Hilda under the blankets like a little rabbit into its hole, shaking with happy noiseless laughter, and leaving nothing visible but a tangle of brown curls.

Gabriel had taught the child a few words of the foreign tongue that he loved for his mother's sake—the little black-eyed mother whose quick and graceful gestures when she spoke were among the most vivid of his boyish memories—the little French mother, lost too soon: always pretty, always buoyant, almost young in the memory of her son, though by this time she would have been a grey-haired, withered little old woman, with furrowed brown cheeks and hands like bird's claws, after the manner of her country-women in the evening of life.

"*C'est donc bien toi, mon camarade!*" sounded a sufficiently-quaint and delicious greeting to Gabriel's ears from Hilda's baby-lips, followed too, as it always was, by the roguish smile of a rosy mouth full of pearls; but "mother" frowned and chid her husband for teaching the child such "gibberish." So Hilda took to whispering gibberish on the sly, and then straightway laying a tiny finger across her own wilful lips, shaking her snood of curls, and saying "Hush!" the while her pretty eyes brimmed over with mischief.

In all her childish troubles the great and abiding sense of how dearly her father loved her was a source of strength and consolation to Hilda. Doubtless she did not justly estimate her mother's love, since it was so seldom shown, and took rather the guise of a hard yoke than any softer form; in truth, the bane and curse of a misguided love is that it is so seldom looked upon as love at all. Hilda, sleeping, could not see her mother looking down upon her with a rare and tender smile; she could not tell that the hand, so much oftener felt in correction than caress, had trembled convulsively when once the child's bold and hardy footsteps had led her to wander perilously near a dangerous bit of the deep dyke. The child saw that her father was unhappy in his home; she could not tell that the wife, who wearied him with sour ways and thwarted him in every little whim and fancy, would, had he lain sick with some deadly disease, have taken her own life in her hand and counted it

as nothing of a cost to pay for his. If there are people in the world (as we know there are) made up of such strange contradictions, such extremes of hardness and devotion, of selfishness and self-sacrifice, that they cannot understand themselves, how can it be expected that others should be any better able to solve a problem so intricate?

Hilda, her ears still tingling from the blow that had been the dole accorded to her loyalty to Miss Ashby and the sweet song of true love taught her by that dear lady, looked stolidly out at the apple-bough, where robin still pouted out his crimson breast, and sang his best.

"No one boxes robin's ears for singing," thought the child, aggrievedly.

"But then he hasn't any stockings to mend—he hasn't any stockings at all, only bits of legs like little black sticks—he may sing all day long if he likes," added conscience.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Devenant had taken the work from Hilda's passive hands, and was subjecting it to a critical examination. She would have been glad had it proved to be ill done. That would have seemed to give some justification to her rebuke anent the foolish song.

But the web of worsted tracery was perfect—a marvel, indeed, to have been achieved by such little hands.

"This is better than the last," she said, giving the meed of praise grudgingly as her custom was. She ever took a full-flavoured satisfaction in finding fault; the words "well done" always dropping haltingly from a reluctant tongue—than which there is no surer way of sapping the joy out of young lives, and discouraging every effort after good.

Mrs. Devenant wore, hanging by her side, what was called in those days a "handy," but now masquerades under the statelier name of *chatelaine*. By it hung, suspended to her shapely waist, thimble (in a little cone-shaped case), scissors, knife, and bodkin (in a case like a Lilliputian coffin).

Now her hand fell to the level where these treasures hung, and Hilda, gathering up her shoulders to her ears, shivered as if she were making up her mind to have one of those precious pearls, her little even teeth pulled ruthlessly from its coral bed.

Snip, snap.

The web of carefully made trellis-work is gone, and the gulf yawns in its place.

A cruel way of teaching stocking-mending, but apt to make a clever scholar.

As an author, lost in contemplation of the creations of his own brain, is often wooed into forgetting that they are not living creatures, so Hilda, intent upon her mending, had forgotten that the groundwork of her labour was only a "make-believe" stocking, which in her parlance meant a stocking fated to be much mended but never worn.

The gaping void which now she stretched upon her finger and thumb seemed a new-made wound. It looked to her troubled eyes as wide and deep as the deepest dyke in the marshes when the tide was out. The task of bridging it over from side to side with a single thread, drawing it together delicately, and then setting to work on a new patch of warp and woof, seemed the most hopeless of undertakings. She eyed the chasm ruefully, while her mother stood by, reading the lovely mutinous little face only too well, and looking out for some sign of rebellion to be promptly crushed.

Most of us, at one time or other in our lives, have stood shivering on the brink of a gulf that has opened in our pathway, wondering how we are to bridge it over, and have, after all, found that fate absolves us from such necessity. It was so with Hilda and her chasm. Just as she had threaded her long-eyed needle, just as she had pulled herself together by a mighty sigh, and was about to attack the enemy, a shadow passed across the casement—passed swiftly and recklessly athwart the sunshine; frightening robin from the apple-bough; frightening Hilda into dropping the "make-believe" stocking; making even Mrs. Devenant start; for, having reached the open door of the white-stoned house-place, the shadow stood confessed as Gabriel Devenant, or rather, something that, had time and place served, might have been taken for his wraith, so pallid were the sunken cheeks, so full of dire despair the haggard eyes.

He hardly seemed to see his wife; indeed he almost stumbled against her as he crossed the embrasure of the window to Hilda's side.

With a cry the child sprang to his arms, nestling there as

he sank upon a wide low settle against the wall, and gathered the little figure to him convulsively.

"My little Hilda, *ma reine—ma reine!*" he murmured, laying his hand upon her ruffled head, and pressing it against his bosom.

"*Qu'as tu, mon père?*" she answered, falling in the abandon of the moment into the "gibberish" he had taught her secretly, and cooing out the words like any "sucking dove."

"*Qu'as tu, mon camarade?*"

"What foolish fancy has possessed you now, Gabriel?" said his wife, harshly enough, yet not without some furtive signs of trouble either, her strong shapely hand working nervously as it hung by her side. "What are you frightening the child's wits out of her like that for?"

That the child should be thought of before the wife—be this "foolish fancy" what it might—was no new thing to Hester Devenant. She was used to fall into the second place. But, for all that, she stood and watched those two clinging figures with a set, hard face of pain, in which resentment struggled with a rising, nameless fear.

The consciousness of being set aside was wont to make her more and more needlessly passionate in her utterances, driving further and further from her the man whom in her inmost heart she loved with the same blind passion as when, years ago, she had slipped out into the gloaming to meet him in the fields about her father's farm, in that springtide that had been like no other in her life before or since, and yet had grown to such a bitter harvest. Even now in this hour of his supreme need, if the hand that worked at her side had been laid on her husband's shoulder, if the eyes that met his had been less keen and more tender, who knows what the future might have held for both?

The time came when, in her mad despair, she could have cut off the hand, and plucked out the eyes that had been so lacking; but that time was not yet, though its chill shadow was upon her even now.

"Fancy!" cried Gabriel, still holding Hilda close; "foolish fancy! God knows I wish it were but that. It is no fancy. We are ruined, Hester, ruined! The bank has been robbed. Every penny we had in the world is gone.

Oh, my little Hilda! my precious one—what will become of you now?"

Still the child, never the wife, not even himself; only Hilda, only *petite reine.*

"You are mad, raving, possessed by a lying devil!" said Hester, turning from him.

The lips that flouted him trembled. Could a dream, a passing fancy, have so changed him in so short a time?

The blanched and stricken face, whereon stood the beading sweat, wanted but the fixed eye and dropped jaw to look as though the cold hand of Azrael, angel of death, had touched it.

"What can I do? Whither shall I go?" he moaned, rocking himself and the child to and fro. "Look here," he went on, and the agony in his voice forced Hester to turn and face him whether she would or no—"Look here; is this a hand to guide the brush to work for bread?"

He held up his hand as he spoke—a hand feeble, emaciated, tremulous as that of one palsied.

"It is your own doing," replied the lips that twitched with a growing fear that would not be kept down; "your own doing, Gabriel. If this mad tale you are telling us is true—if Hilda and I are doomed to be homeless and penniless, still—it is your doing."

"Mine?" he gasped; "mine?" while Hilda in terror clung about his neck. But he unclasped the loving girdle of her arms, and put her from him, staggering to his feet, tearing at the tarnished clasp of his cloak as if its folds stifled him and he would fain be rid of it, pushing the hat from his head, confronting his wife as the criminal confronts his judge, and still gasping out the word of appeal: "Mine—mine?"

"Yes, yours," said Hester pitilessly, roughly shaking herself free from Hilda's clinging hold upon her dress as from something that impeded her utterance; "yours, and yours only! What makes your hand shake like that, Gabriel Devenant? Shall I tell you? Well, it is that dark stuff you take from the little bottle that you keep so secret and think no one knows save yourself—not even your wife. What fills your head with mad fancies, and makes you mutter gibberish in your sleep—what but that devil's drink?

If all the banks in all the land were robbed and you with them, you could have kept a roof above our heads by working at your old trade; and now—what have you made of yourself? A helpless fool and nothing else. What have you made of me—and of Hilda? Paupers, if all you say is true; ay, as much as if you'd been the one to rob what others toiled for. That's what you've made of yourself and of us—and now you must whimper over it like a sick dog."

The time came when she could have torn out the tongue that spoke such words: but the time was not yet, though its chill shadow was upon her even now.

CHAPTER VI.

HER WEARY QUEST.

An hour later on that ill-fated day, and Hester Devenant knew that no mad fancy had filled her husband's brain, but a stern and cruel truth.

First one and then another coming up from the town, stragglers from the City of Destruction, told eagerly (and not without a certain pleasure in having such marvellous news to tell) of the wonderful events that were convulsing Becklington to its centre.

Mrs. Devenant was a woman who had no "gossips"—no favourite scandal-mongers, who, gathered in a magic fireside circle, bespattered this or that one's character to the merry clink of tea-cup and saucer. She had always held aloof even from her nearest neighbours, and some of these, smarting under this reserve, were nothing loth now to carry ill news, to which she could not well turn a deaf ear, since its personal interest for herself was so extreme.

They came and they went; they babbled and disputed; one telling this version, one another; all dilated profusely upon Gabriel Devenant's seizure in the market-place, sparing the wretched listener no single detail of how he "rolled his eyes and foamed at the mouth"; the while Hester fought proudly for calmness and fortitude, chiding Hilda at

every turn as an outlet to the growing trouble in her own breast.

For let who might come and go, there was one who had gone and came not again—Gabriel Devenant.

What had he said in answer to those bitter words hurled at his head like so many stones flung from a sling?

With eyes dark, cloudy, full of desperate pain, such as may be seen in those of the dumb beast she had likened him to, he had started to his feet, striving for breath and speech.

At last the words came:

"I am all you say and more; I have been weak and wicked, but it was your temper—your jealous ways—your mocking tongue—drove me to it."

Then, dazed and full of a nameless fear, Hester leant against the casement, holding back the lattice with her hand, to watch the flitting figure pass away under the ruddy apple-boughs.

Not unpursued though.

For a little maid with brown locks flying out behind her ran on nimble feet, and caught him by the fluttering ends of his cloak, caught and held, and kissed the hand that would have put her aside (lips being out of reach); and Hester saw him stoop, lift the little one in his arms, let her curl about his neck, let her nestle her head upon his shoulder as he murmured softly, *Ma petite reine! ma petite reine!*

All her life long Hilda will hear the echo of those words when she thinks of a love that seemed to pass out of her life with the utterance of them.

Mother and child took their noontide meal together, while at the round white wooden table under the house-room window a third chair stood empty.

When tea-time came it was empty still, and Hester's face was pale, with a deep line showing between her beautiful brows, and now and again a convulsive twitch stirring her mouth.

No fresh news came from the town, for the excellent reason that there was none to come, since everything was in abeyance waiting the advent of that terrible arm of the law, the Bow Street runner. Apparently the townsfolk found a sad consolation in staring at the closed bank, and Jake spent

a spasmodic afternoon in constantly pursuing Abel Dibbs across the market-place, catching him by the lobe of the ear, and dragging him ignominiously away from the pleasures of a stony contemplation of the one central object of interest.

Indeed, what with these intermittent expeditions after his unregenerate servitor, and a longer expedition in company with a paper-bag of jam tarts to the poor cottage where dwelt the widow, the "patch," and the "three soles," Jake had a busy time of it.

Perhaps pastry is *not* the most sustaining food whereon to face affliction, but the intention hallowed the deed in the widow's eyes, and a faint bit of a smile—the first Jake had seen there—hovered round her lips as she thanked him. As to the "patch," he peered into the bag, and set to work to feed the smaller fry.

"Just like him!" thought Jake as he trotted home, capturing "the boy" on the way, and not only leading him, but shaking him, by the ear this time.

That night the sun went down clad in royal robes of crimson and gold—beautiful diaphanous robes, whose skirts trailed across the blue dome of his kingly domain in glorious amplitude. Then in his wake came the quiet moon, climbing a stairway of fleecy cloud to peep at little Hilda, fast asleep, with a tear on her eyelash, and now and again a sob heaving her gentle bosom.

The little soul had fallen asleep, after long wakefulness, wondering, wondering, wondering, what had become of "*mon camarade*," and the glistening tears and the piteous sobs were the aftermath of that troublous time of thought and longing.

Ere long a tall figure, hooded and cloaked, the hood shrouding a pale eager face, bent over the sleeping child a moment, laid the bedclothes more easily, put back the out-flung hands into warmth and shelter, and then went softly away.

Hester and pride had held fierce and bitter conflict, and the woman had gained the day. To seek what she had herself driven forth, even in seeming to unsay what she had said, was a bitter humiliation to Gabriel Devenant's hard and haughty wife. And yet—go she must!

The long lonely hours of the night, hours of uncertainty,

of wild surmise, of solitary self-communing, faced her like a black wall ready to fall upon and crush her. Step aside she must to escape that threatening horror.

This was not the first time by many a one that Gabriel had gone forth from his home a fugitive from a hail of words, a sufferer under the cruel thong of a woman's tongue; but never before had he had the same look upon his face—the look not only of a tortured animal, but of a hunted creature brought to bay, and ready to do some desperate thing in a despairing self-defence—never once, in all the weary years of terrible dispeace and jangling discord, until now.

It was late, very late for a woman to be out alone in that lonely place, when Mrs. Devenant closed the door of the house and stood a moment—not knowing whether to turn this way or that.

The half-hour past eleven chimed from the church-tower as she hesitated. This way or that? Downwards, towards the town, where a few glimmering lights told of life and stir—or upwards, towards where the dark pines grew thick, making the air fragrant with their fallen spears and cones; where the pollards kept watch beside the dyke, and the water-rat rustled among the sedges and broke the stillness with the splash of his dark sleek body in the stream? The tide was rising, filling the dykes with a swift rush. Hester heard the water sobbing as it rose. It had an eerie sound coming from under the bank of flags and ferns. The pollards shivered in a new-born breeze that came up from the sea. A curlew, startled from its roost, fluttered low upon the ground, crying, as it flew, a weird and plaintive cry like the cry of a broken heart.

She gathered her cloak about her, and set off towards the town. For a while the road ran alongside a branch of the many mouthed river, then branched off, passing through goodly fields and under spreading beech and linden trees. It was more of a lane than a road, and more rutty than the farmers quite approved of; not so straight, either, as it might have been by a good deal, so that Hester, going downhill, heard someone singing coming up hill whom yet she could not see.

No tender nightingale wooing the night with softest

melody, but rather some burly bull of Bashan striving to be tuneful; someone, too, who had got hold of the day topsy-turvy, inverting the order of nature, for, though the moonlight slept upon the meadows and scattered jewels on the ripples of the river, he sang the song of morning, lustily, and as if he meant it:

"Let all my converse be sincere,
My conscience as the noonday clear;
Think how all-seeing God thy ways,
And all thy secret thought surveys."

Farmer Dale—for the singer was none other—was still at the job of trying to bear his burden of sorrow like a man. He was bringing his sturdy yeoman's mind to settle upon any possible lights that might be discernible in what looked like a prospect bleak and dark indeed. He had many blessings to be thankful for: first and foremost, an excellent, thrifty, cheery-minded wife.

"A man as has that blessin' i' his life canna be a poor man, so to say, no matter how the wind blows," thought Farmer Dale, jogging along at a steady pace. "She'll make no mighty bodderment over the thing, won't Nancy. 'It's a bad job, Tom,' she'll say, 'and we mun just mak' t' best on't,' that's what she'll say. But there's yon lad o' mine, as I'd thought to give such schooling to as should mak' a gentleman on him, and now, weel, weel, he'll have to bide whoam and moind t' farm, and that's all about it."

Somehow the outcome of this train of thought on the farmer's part was the singing of that untimely and inappropriate morning hymn. The fact is, it was borne in upon his honest soul that someone bore a heavier burden than loss or sorrow that night; that a load of black guilt was pressing on some human creature; that it was better to have a sorrowful heart than a seared conscience.

"Wake and lift up thyself, my heart,
And with the angels . . . "

"Hey day! Mistress Devenant, does yon be yo'?"

The excess of his musical zeal carried him on so that he chanted the sentence almost as if it were a part of the hymn.

The farmer stood still, and Hester stood still.

"Have you chanced to see my husband?" she said, twisting her hands one in the other as she spoke, trying to strangle the rebellious pride within her.

The farmer, glancing keenly and furtively at the troubled face, clipt round by the plaited hood, took off his low-crowned beaver, the better to scratch his head.

There was what he called in his own mind a "daft-like" look about Hester that he didn't fancy; he doubted if the man who had robbed the bank—be he who he might—could look worse.

That is what he thought; what he said was this:

"Aye, I seen him, po'r chap, down by the market-place; he seemed troubled i' his moind like, mistress, but that's what a many of us are this day, and he must howd up—he must howd up like t' rest on us."

"Did you speak to him?" she said, looking as if she were deaf to all else save the one fact that her husband had been seen.

"Noa, he giv' us t' slip, did Maister Devenant; he flitted by us, so to say, slape as a bat on t' wing."

"Which way did he take?" said Hester, twisting her hands more and more. Her pride was rolling in the dust, yet rearing its bruised head like some living thing.

"I canna reetly say," said the farmer; "he flitted yo' see, mistress."

"Yes, but which way did he flit?" said Hester with some impatience.

"He flitted out o' soight; he seemed like as if he were sore troubled in t' yed. There's a many i' Becklington same as him this night, Mistress Devenant; but happen their yeds is stronger than his'en, and can stand more wi'out brastin'."

Hester, still pressing her hands the one in the other, made some assenting motion of the lips, while her eyes, gazing wistfully around, seemed to say:

"Whither shall I turn my steps to seek my lost one?"

Farmer Dale let no look of hers escape him; he saw that things were going badly with her, and his honest kindly heart yearned to help her.

"See, missis," he said, coming a step nearer to her side; "happen it 'ud be well if yo'd let me go along with you after

Maister Devenant? It's a lonesome time for a woman to be out; and as to my old woman, why it's this way twixt her and me, if so be as I should chance to be out of reason late, she'd know there'd be good cause. I've stayed a bit over time at The Safe Retreat to-night, there bein' so much to talk over and digest, as you may say, but, bless you, what does that matter? Nance knows I am always safe to cross t' plank as lies over t' brook at bottom of our garden wi'out a stumble. Good fellowship I'm for; drunkenness I'm agen; and that there plank I call a test. 'Build a proper bridge, Tom,' says Nance to me (she's a proud kind o' wench is Nance, and one as likes to shine afore her neighbours). 'No,' says I to her, 'I wo'ant; that there plank's a test,' says I; 'if I comes home as a sober man should, I can cross it; if I'm the worse for drink, in I go, and out I get a mask o' duckweed; let t' plank bide.'"

All this sounded somewhat irrelevant on the part of the speaker, but it was not meant so. It was said partly to gain time (in the hope that Gabriel Devenant might suddenly "flit" into sight, and bring his wife's quest thus happily to an end), partly as an outlet or overflow for the growing uneasiness in his own bosom, and a consequent reluctance to lose sight of the troubled yet defiant woman.

It may be questioned whether Hester even heard the story of the plank that was the nightly test of the farmer's sobriety. Yet she felt a warm sense of comfort in the sound of his hearty voice, and of help in his hearty sympathy. The weakest part of her even longed to accept his offer of companionship. But the pride within her shrank from the thought of any third person witnessing her meeting with the man from whom she had parted in bitterness and anger.

"It is very good of you to offer to go with me, farmer," she said, gazing not at him, but into the world of flickering shadows about them, as though she longed to be gone, "but I had rather go alone. Good-night to you." Then she added, with a faint smile that lighted up her face into wonderful beauty for the moment: "Don't think that my own trouble makes me forget yours."

Another moment and she was out of sight, so quickly did her eager feet bear her onward, while the farmer was left

alone under the stars, with the night wind sighing through the pines.

"I'm blest!" he thought to himself, smiting his thigh in wonderment, "but that's a rum 'un, that is! Such a scholard, too, as I hear. Why, my lady hersel' don't speak prettier; and eyes like gimlets for going through a chap; a tongue, too, as I hear, like a whip of sma' cords. She's a fine woman, and no mistake, is Mistress Devenant; but there's blessin's as cuts both ways, I reckon."

Here a vision of Nancy's apple-face and cheery smile came up before the eyes of his mind, and he felt that his own lot had fallen unto him in pleasant places. But, keeping his homeward way, he went thoughtfully. He sang the morning hymn no more. A dead march, had he known the tune of one, would have better suited his frame of mind.

Mistress Devenant might have a bitter tongue and a hard look, but for all that she carried that night a terrible load of fear and sorrow in her breast, or he, Farmer Dale, was "a Dutchman."

Lacking the phlegm of that stolid nation, he was conscious of a great pity for the woman who—at once sad and defiant of her own trouble—had just set out upon a weary quest.

Truly, she deserved such dole of compassion as she made her lonely way towards the lights of the town that lay gathered in a group in the hollow near the sea.

For with every step the fears that had borne her company all through the day grew and multiplied, one giving birth to another—the offspring darker than the parent.

Mingling with these came phantoms of the past—sad-eyed ghosts of things that had been, and were not, nor ever should arise to new sweet life again. How was it that the words of Hilda's foolish song—the song that had been rudely chidden as a fault—came to Hester's remembrance now.

> "It is not—it cannot be—laid aside;
> It is not a thing to forget or hide. . . ."

What cannot be laid aside—what cannot be hidden, pile what you may of stifling coldness or cruel estrangement upon its reproachful face? The love of a wife for the man who has been the lover of her youth. You may trample it, but it will not die; you may outrage it, but it will not fly;

and in the hour of sorrow and suffering it starts into new life, new strength, new passion.

> "It clings to the heart—ah! woe is me!
> As the ivy clings to the old oak tree. . . ."

In vain did that hydra-headed monster, Hester's pride, try to tear it and cast it from her; it would not be put forth. It kept her eerie company, dimming her unaccustomed eyes with tears, so that the lights of the town grew blurred to her sight. She sobbed as she walked. A torrent of irresistible tenderness towards the man she had driven forth with jeers and taunts flooded her soul. If she could only find him—only find him! How all the old happy days came back to her! The days when she first met him, when he seemed to her better than the best, goodlier than the goodliest: their first chance meeting when she came upon him at his easel in a leafy dell, stealing the leaf-shadows from the grass to set them, soft and wavering, on the canvas. The gentle words he spoke, seeing her; his timid request that she would stand a moment, her coal-scuttle bonnet hanging on her arm, the olive-green of her simple cloak and gown harmonising well (so he said) with the lighter greens about her, the bunch of ox-eyed daisies and pimpernel at her breast lighting up the whole.

And she had lingered there to do his will, holding her head proudly the while, too, as a sort of compromise with dignity; she had stood there feeling the light of his eyes upon her as the flowers feel the sunshine—feeling that he was drinking in each special beauty she had been dowered with—possessions never very highly valued before, but now precious exceedingly.

For love came to Hester Deacon at a bound, not in dainty lingering steps; later in life than to most women, and therefore more infinitely sweet; for is not the late prune ofttimes the ripest?

How sweet it was, as the early summer days passed on, and meetings grew from one to many, making each day bright with points of light, as though it were a night and set with stars, to note how Gabriel Devenant's wonder grew at all the things the farmer's daughter knew; at the books she had read, at her gentle speech, free from the rough

Lancashire dialect; at the stately grace of every movement; at the glory of the massive coils of burnished hair which formed a queenly crown about her head!

And then—just when hay-carrying was over, and all the lanes were sweet, and every low-bending branch was fringed with hay brushed from passing carts high-piled—the evening when first he told his love in words; when first his lips touched hers, and she shivered beneath the solemn ecstasy of the first thrill of passion that her life had ever known. She had been a proud and lonely woman, this farmer's daughter, who was so much above her surroundings; who, longing for knowledge, had stretched forth her hand to gather it; living from day to day in company with her own thoughts, and seeming to need no other; even then more feared than loved; aggressive in her demands of submission from her own family, wedded to her own will, imperious, jealous of slight, less happy than many a less gifted woman.

But, when Love came, his magic touch changed everything, teaching Hester a strange new gentleness, filling all her life with fragrance, as the scent of the hay perfumed all the world in those fair days of summer's first and sweetest harvest.

Why did these memories of a far-off time lift their dead faces from the shroud of years, pleading so piteously for remembrance and recognition—to-night?

The very wind that came up from the sea, buffeting the gently-stirring pines, seemed laden with the perfume of the new-mown hay; the ripple of the river she was nearing seemed to sing the song of the merry hay-makers—the song she and Gabriel had stood to hearken to in the gloaming!

No, no; the words of their song did not run like that—

> "It is not—it cannot be—laid aside;
> It is not a thing to forget or hide. . . ."

Who sang that dreary coronach?

Hilda, sitting in the sunshine, with the flickering shadows from the apple-boughs outside touching her pretty locks, and the black worsted stocking stretched upon her hand.

Forget? Who can do that if the old delver Thought takes to turning up bones and relics, and all such charnel-house properties?

Hide? What is the good of hiding things that come creeping out of their niches, and peer into your face, whether you will or not, whispering: "Do you not know me? I am the love you tried to kill, the tenderness you tried to trample under foot. Look at me! Am I not wan and wasted? Let me stay! Do not drive me from you; do not let me think that I am quite forgotten."

Thus did Hester—haunted, fearsome, full of a growing dread—betake herself upon her weary quest.

No human being save herself seemed astir. Once a startled rabbit darted across her path with ears uplifted and white tail aglint.

Once, twice, thrice, a bat circled about her head as recalling an old north-country superstition, she shuddered, drawing her cloak closer and walking more hurriedly.

"Three times the bat flies;
Some one lies
Dead ere dawn
Of morrow's morn."

A crazy rhyme of Hilda's, learnt from some foolish country wench or ignorant bumpkin.

Her own head cannot be much to boast of to-night, since love-songs and meaningless rhymes jostle one another therein, and phantoms, wraiths, and sentimental memories, run riot among the rest.

This last rhyme is tenacious, too. It sets itself to the sound of her own footsteps like words to music:

"Some one lies
Dead ere dawn
Of morrow's morn."

She has reached the fork where two roads meet. The lights of the town gleam nearer now—at least, such of them as are not put out because of the lateness of the hour.

Hester stands a moment, glancing carelessly—so unlikely is her quarry to be found lurking that way—up the road that leads past the White House, and on towards York city.

Stay! what is that shadow flitting along the ruts that show pale in the moonlight?

It is the shadow of the head and shoulders of a man.

The shoulders are cloaked; the head carries a low-crowned broad-brimmed hat; the rest of the figure is hidden by the shade under the lee of the hedgerow.

Another moment and this shadow of a man is chased by the shadow of a woman.

Hester is on her husband's track.

Her step is light, her limbs are lithe and active.

She gains upon him; is so near him that she can hear him muttering to himself, see him gesticulating—words and gestures meaning Heaven alone knows what!

She can almost touch him now; his shadow almost mingles with her. She is ready to stretch forth her hand, when lo! nothing but the bare roadway lies before her.

Was it but a phantom that had lured her on, the creature of her own dazed brain?

Had not her eyes been gazing upon the past as upon a fair country seen across a wild waste of barren desert? Was the figure half in shadow, half in light, but part of that strange mirage of the mind?

Nay, for she had heard Gabriel's footfall, heard his muttered words: it was no impalpable wraith she had chased, but a living, breathing man.

She stands a moment bewildered under the gently stirring shadows of the branches overhead, and looks eagerly round. There is no fell mystery in Gabriel's disappearance after all. He has but slipped through the half-open iron gateway of the White House. Jeremy Bindwhistle having been upset in his mind, partly by the strange events at the bank, partly by Mrs. Prettyman's "snappin' of him up so mighty sharp," partly by the "imperence" of the stable-boy, had been lax, in the fulfilment of his duties, and had sought a hasty asylum in the bosom of his family, there to open out his grievances, instead of going his nightly rounds to see that all is as it should be, the gate among the rest.

Hence Gabriel had made his way in without sound of hinge, or click of latch, and the gateway, lying in deep shadow, by reason of the trees that stood thick on either hand, had seemed to be suddenly blotted out from the face of nature.

Hester follows, not far though. She creeps among Jeremy's posies, and watches.

Like some bird of ill-omen fluttering round a doomed

house, Gabriel swiftly, and with cat-like stealth, makes for a window whence shines a ruddy cheerful light. The window is curtained, but just as Gabriel reaches it the curtain is hastily drawn aside. Gabriel starts back and with a strange gesture, as of malediction, is lost among the trees by the gate just as the casement is violently opened and set back in its stanchion. Midnight strikes from the old church tower as Hester stands bewildered, up to her knees in a tangle of flowers. Was it fancy, or had she heard a low shuddering cry from within the room whence came the ruddy glow of light?

She had no time now to give to that mental patchwork to which we all devote ourselves after any time of intense suffering and excitement. She had no time to put this and that together, to search for motives, to unearth the why and the wherefore of things strange and unwonted.

That was to come after.

She only felt; she did not think. Her mind was set to one resolve, as the needle to the pole. She must overtake Gabriel and lead him home. If she could only find him, she would reproach him no more. A sudden chance of earning a little money had come in her way. She would grasp the chance with both hands. She would work for her husband and for Hilda. She would keep the bread in their mouths, the roof over their heads. She would be glad to do it. Maybe Gabriel would give her that little dark-blue bottle with the glass stopper, and she would cast it into the deepest of the dykes: the shining bubbles would come up from the bottom, laughing on the surface at the prey far down in the black ooze and mud. Then things would grow brighter. Who knows but that a faint—very faint—reflection of the days she has been looking back upon across the dreary desert of the years that lie between then and now may come about? Hester does not know it, but she is sobbing as she walks; she goes heavily, and, stumbling, mutters that the ground is rough, whereas it is the hot tears that rise and blind her. Awhile she lingers, waiting, listening, peering among the slender pine-boles for what she cannot see. Then she comes to a resolve. She will go home, just on the chance that Gabriel may have gone there too. Hilda is the magnet that she thinks may draw him thither. He has not

kissed the child good-night. He would remember his "little queen." He must be very tired by this time; very weary of wandering: faint, too, for want of food. Yes, she will cross by the narrow pathway through the pine-wood, pass through the dykes, and so reach home again.

It is an eerie place that pine-wood after midnight; endless serried ranks of tall slim boles on either hand; stirring branches overhead that sigh as they sway.

There, it is passed—she is out in the open once more, and draws a long breath of relief.

It is pleasant to be within sight of home again; pleasant to fancy Gabriel may be there before her.

The tide has been rising—is rising still with quick irresistible rush. The long water-grass bends to the current; the forget-me-nots are getting their blue eyes wet.

The pollards by the deepest dyke of all keep their endless vigil like sentries ever alert.

Is that the cry of some night bird swooping upon roosting prey—or is it a banshee keening forth a warning of sorrow to come? It is no bird of night—no evil-boding banshee. That cry comes from the ashen lips of a woman who kneels by the swirling dyke, gazing with starting eyes into its black depths.

The hood has fallen from her head—she presses back the hair from her brow with both hands—her eyes grow to the quivering surface of the water. She crushes all the mellow fern-fronds and golden king-cups that fringe the dyke as she crouches close, close to the treacherous bank.

Is that the gleam of a water-lily kissed by the moonlight, that white shimmer in the dark stream? Or, is it a dead white face rising slowly from oozy depths to meet that other bending over it? Slowly—slowly it rises through the veil of the water that parts to let it pass.

And Hester—watching so intently that her heart scarce beats, her breast scarce stirs—waits till the drops fall, shining like jewels, from staring glassy eyes, from livid lips, from long dishevelled locks; then, swaying slowly down to meet it, she catches the floating horror in her arms, and drags it from the current that would have sucked it down again had it got the chance.

Tearing the forget-me-nots from their bed, rending and

breaking the sedges and king-cups, she dragged up her burden on to the grass.

She had sought Gabriel long. Now she had found him.

She tore open the breast of his shirt, and thrust in her hand to feel if the heart she had broken still beat.

Not the faintest movement could she feel. She huddled the cold clammy hands into her own bosom, as though warmth could be wooed back to them.

As she drew him further on to the mossy ground—further away from that terrible yawning grave full of bubbling water, his head fell back in the awful helplessness of death, a fearsome sight, with staring sightless eyes and dropped jaw. Hester knew no fear. She slipped her arm about the neck, pillowing the head upon her breast, rocking herself and it to and fro, moaning as unconsciously as she had sobbed a while ago.

She was alone with her dead. The chill shadow that had been about her path all day now wrapped her round.

And through her dazed brain there ran once more the foolish, crazy rhyme:

> "Some one lies
> Dead ere dawn
> Of morrow's morn."

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. BUNNYCASTLE'S LANDLORD.

It may safely be said that the people who had no money in Becklington Bank enjoyed themselves very much at this time. They had their fill of amazement; they breakfasted, dined, tea'd, and supped upon excitement and wonder, and many of them lay awake far on into the night, busy with anticipation of still further marvels to come. That the monotonous surface of life in a country town should be so ruffled was a fact not wholly devoid of pleasure; but even the most rapacious after some new thing were ready to cry, "Hold—enough!" when the suicide of Gabriel Devenant

followed so promptly upon the bank robbery. Of course the one event had grown out of the other. The weak mind of the gloomy recluse had been unable to face calamity. He had become a deserter from the battle of life, lacking courage to meet the enemy.

Jake, feeling that after a day of tearing excitement the mind of man required to be soothed by the contemplation of rural and domestic objects, was stepping (backwards, and in imminent danger of running up against some one) across the market-place the better to observe his fantailed pigeons strutting on the roof, their conceit in no wise diminished by the fact of their feathers being more or less sooty, when the boy suddenly bolted into view with his mouth wide-open, and his eyes like a young lobster's.

"Maister Devenant's been and made away with hisself i' the noight,—drownded hisself dead i' the big dyke. His missis pult 'im out, and down hoo come to old Betty Higgens' abeatin' wi' her hands upon t' door like as if t' wur a droom. Hoo caught Jem Higgens by t' yare o' his yed and tel't him as she'd knock t' loife out of him if he didna' run and fetch Dr. Turtle that directly minute, aye, did hoo; and two lads from Higgens's farm laid holt on a shutter and went along wi' her, and her struck dumb-like, and mum like, and holding on to herself loike, as she was about to fall i' pieces; and Dr. Turtle he come, dressed ony kind of a way loike t' scarecrow i' our back garden, and runnin' same as if old Matthew were after him for robbin' an orchard," said Abel with a gulp, drawing on his personal experiences for an illustration; "but he couldn't do nothin', and Maister Devenant's leein' stiff and stark; and Bill and Bobby set their noses agen t' windoo, but could't see nothin' for t' bloind, and Softie he caught 'em by t' lug and walloped 'em—ay, that did he."

"Served 'em right, too, the varmints," said Jake, "and t' same 'ull be served out to you if you dunna' get to your work and look sharp about it."

Jake positively refused to be astonished by anything the boy could tell him. He had therefore during the recital of Gabriel Devenant's lamentable end kept his eyes studiously fixed upon his pigeons: and now, for the first time, brought his vision down to bear upon Abel's excited countenance.

He even hummed a stave of a Methodist hymn to show how thoroughly cool he was, and how calmly ready he was to receive the news of any other calamity that might have happened in Becklington during the night, as though it were his daily food.

Abel, not a little crestfallen, retired into the back parlour, Jake pushed his brass-rimmed spectacles up to the top of his head, shoved his hands into his pockets, and lounged across the pavement to greet a passing neighbour.

"Is yon true that I hear aboot Maister Devenant?" he said composedly.

"Aye," replied the man; "he's gone to his long home sure enoo,' and a damp road he took to 't. It's all along o' the terrification over t' bank robbery as this has come about. He couldn't face the thing, couldn't Maister Devenant."

For all this show of calm composure of which he had made display to crush and impress the boy, Jake's soul within him was in a ferment of amaze and pain. He had lived in Becklington, boy and man, for nigh upon fifty years, and never known such a time of seething tumult. Who might know whether these stormy portents did not point towards the end of all things and the near approach of the Battle of Armageddon?

Jake took a furtive glance at a certain old and rusty matchlock that was hung against the wall of the back parlour over the mantel-shelf.

True the kind of arms to be used at the great encounter was a moot point with divines; but it was well to be on the safe side, to keep your spiritual armour bright, and at the same time to have some trusty carnal weapon handy.

Abel, catching the furtive glance, and following it, was of a mind to think suicides were the order of the day, and that his master was on desperate thoughts intent. He had much ado to prevent blubbering outright as this frightful suggestion crossed his mind, for Abel loved his little master in spite of all the scolding and ear-pulling that came as part of the day's work, and had been known to challenge young Becklington in the matter of producing "a better soart," or one who sang hymns "wi' a bigger stummick."

It was a relief to Abel when his master went leisurely out of the shop, and out of sight, leaving the matchlock behind.

Gradually Jake quickened his footsteps until he broke into a sort of gentle trot.

He did not take the way that so many were going who had, or could make, an hour to spare; he did not go to stare at the shrouded window of the house among the dykes; he did not go and hang around, as many did in the hope of seeing the authorities arrive to hold inquiry into the circumstances of Gabriel Devenant's death.

He took quite an opposite direction towards what was called the Old Town, a crowded district running out in little lanes of very humble dwellings, and dominated over by a windmill royally seated on an eminence, whirling his big sails round and round as relentlessly as though they formed a wheel of fate, and were making or marring the lives of men.

When Sunday came and the sails were still, a Sabbath stillness seemed to be over everything; a line was drawn definitely and broadly between the week-days and the day of rest. The miller, too, on Sundays wore a black or brown coat like any other man; but all the week he seemed to be trying to make himself as like a sugar figure on a twelfth-night cake as might be, so white was he. He was of the Methodist persuasion, and looked upon by that body as a man of weight; whereas Jake (a zealous member of the same sect) was regarded as a man of energy, and—as is, alas! often the case with great men—the two had more than once, to the secret satisfaction of the less eminent, shown signs of mutual jealousy and distrust.

The miller was a rigid keeper of the Sabbath, and on that day, if he looked at the mill at all, he looked at it as if he rather thought it belonged to some one else. Nor would he tolerate the most delicately-veiled allusion to business on the "seventh day," which did not, however, prevent him from driving the hardest of bargains on other days, and in his working dress, being at such times like a badly-boiled potato, floury outside and stonyhearted within.

He owned many of the houses round about the mill, and was looked upon as a "stiff 'un" in regard to rent; in fact you were esteemed wise to save your breath to cool your porridge—if you had any to cool—rather than waste it in entreaties for gentle dealing from the miller, you being unfortunate enough to find yourself in his power.

Now Mrs. Bunnycastle, the shabby widow who owned poor "patch" and the three "soles," lived in one of these little houses near the mill, and owned the miller as a landlord, and it was thither, all breakfastless as he was, that Jake had betaken himself so hurriedly. It would, perhaps, be hard to say why the story of Gabriel Devenant's death had thus induced him to leave the boy to play the mischief with the coffee and run to unhallowed excess in buttering the toast; maybe the remembrance of the drawn white face beneath the widow's cap had set him wondering if this one, too, might not find life a thing too hard and cruel to be endured.

Anyway, here he was, his apron flapping in the breeze and concealing all deficiencies in the way of legs, as he came up the gentle incline that led towards the mill.

"Has noo dot any more jam pies, Mr. Toomaker?" cried the youngest and smallest child, toddling to meet him as soon as she espied him.

"Patch" no doubt would have reproved this grasping spirit of his little sister, but that he had enough to do to hold on tight to his mother's hand and look up earnestly into her face, as she stood opposite a tall whitened figure that looked many sizes too big for the tiny room. Every time the miller (for it was he) stirred hand or foot, little grains of flour fell from his clothes, as if he were a gigantic snow-man and about to melt.

But there was little else of the melting mood about the miller.

He had stepped round to remind his tenant that it chanced to be rent-day—as if there is any chance of her forgetting a fact with which she has been keeping vigil face to face through the long sleepless hours of the night.

"I know it is rent-day," she said, trembling as she spoke, and squeezing poor "patch's" hand so hard that he would have cried out if he hadn't been the sort of boy that never does cry out; "I should have gone to the bank to draw the money this very morning. I should indeed, if it hadn't ha' been——"

"That's as you like, Mrs. Bunnycastle," said the miller, making quite a snow-storm of himself as he walked to the window, nodded to Jake, and whistled a stave of "Rule

Britannia" between his teeth. "I don't care where people keep their money as long as they don't keep it from them to whom it's justly doo," he observed presently, as if he were enumerating a noble sentiment that redounded vastly to his credit; "and I'll call round, as I said before, when I've done my day's work."

"But I say, miller," put in Jake, "don't you know t' bank's stopped, and the poor soul conna get her bit o' money to-day? Happen she'll never get it."

"My mill ain't stopped, and that's all as consarn's me, neighbour Jake. I'm a man as minds my own business and dunna meddle."

"But this sin as has been sinned i' the midst on us isn't her sin," continued Jake, growing eloquent under the steady appeal of "patch's" eyes. "Give her time—a few days' grace. Happen things 'ull turn out better nor folks fancy; happen there 'll be summat saved."

"I'll have my rent by sunset, as the law declares it doo, or I'll put the brokers in by sunrise come to-morrow. I'm a just man; I take what I've right to, and want no more."

"Try bein' a mercifoo' mon once in a way. Change is good for us a', and there's as much about him as about t'other chap i' Scripter," said Jake—always under the spell of "patch's" eyes, feeling that the gift of words was on him, and no mistake. "Give her toime, neighbour—give her toime."

The miller looked hard and breathed hard at the little cobbler, thought he saw his chance of slipping him inside a cleft stick, and took it.

"If thee'lt go surety for her, i' front of two witnesses, to pay double rent this day month, I'll give her the month's grace and leave the roof she conna pay for over her head."

"Patch" left his mother's side and came creeping round to Jake, finally catching hold of one side of the bronzed apron, and holding on like a young leech.

"Done wi' yo!" cried Jake, clapping one hand in the other. "I'll be round at your place at one o' the clock, so have your witnesses i' readiness. I'm a po'r man, but I can work extry, and t' fall of the year's best time for folk gettin' their boots fettled for winter, and orderin' new ones for Sundays."

But flour, not shoes and boots, being the miller's business, that worthy had taken himself off before Jake got to the end of his sentence.

As to Mrs. Bunnycastle, she had entirely subsided into herself and a rickety arm-chair by the fire. Strength of mind was by no means her strong point, and the "patch" must assuredly have inherited his courage and determination either from his father or from some remote ancestor.

"It is so little—so little!" sobbed the widow, wringing her hands. "Surely it could be worth no one's while to take the widow's mite."

"It all went along wi' the lot, I reckon," said Jake, "like big and little fishes i' the net, and favour showed to none."

"He held my hand in his," went on the poor woman, punctuating her sentences with sobs, "and 'Tilda,' says he, 'it's but a little, but it will keep a roof over your head.'"

"That was very kind and thoughtful on him, put in Jake, feeling that a few complimentary words anent the deceased Bunnycastle were called for; "he must have bin a good soart of a chap, must Bunnycastle, and a sorry loss to you and the little 'uns; but crying over spilt milk never gathered it up i' the can agin."

Then, suddenly conscious that his application of the proverb was indiscreetly vague, since it might apply either to the widow's mite or to the departed Bunnycastle, Jake hastily took himself off.

True, he went home with an added burden on his lean shoulders, but cheered by the reflection that he had been of help in time of need, while, as to the eloquence of "patch's" eyes, it beat all the deaf and dumb talk ever invented. Ah, Jake! Jake! after all, Amos Callender was right, and legs are but a trifling consideration, if only the heart is right with God.

And it really did seem as if the little cobbler's good angel were on the alert, for three or four country orders—big ones, too—came in before noon, while the boy developed a scornful demeanour towards his fellows, feeling the reflected importance of such a run of trade.

Jake sat stitching away on his low, broad, backless bench,

giving a glance at the bank every now and then, and at the loiterers on the look-out for anything that might happen, many of them glad of an excuse to neglect their legitimate work, and wet the throats that grew dry with expectation at the bar of The Safe Retreat. Jake was not one of that sort. According to his ideas the day previous had been a thing altogether too unprecedented and stupendous to admit of divided attention. No man—no matter what his professional enthusiasm—could have heeled a shoe, or soled a boot, in the midst of such a turmoil as made the old market-place for all the world like a cauldron of boiling water.

But the worst was known now; the people of Beckling-ton had been asked to wait, and had given their word to wait, and the way for an honest man to wait was to do his work and see to his family.

Why, Amos Callender was down in the tan-yard half-an-hour earlier than his wont that morning, and Bess had a dish of smoking hot black-puddings all ready for dinner when he got back home to cheer him up and keep his mind off troublous matters.

"If you're down on your luck, you're down on your luck," said the honest tanner; "but you've no occasion to roll on it, and wallow in it like a pig i' mire. Its best to find yer feet and go ahead a bit, if so be as yo' can."

And he was as good as his word too, helping many another to put a brave face on matters, and take patience till all should be made manifest.

But we are wandering from Jake stitching away for dear life, and feeling as if every stitch, tightened to extremity of tension, was a fraction put by towards that double rent for which he was to go surety before two witnesses at one of the clock.

As he worked he sang, even as Hilda—poor Hilda—had lilted over her stocking-mending the morning before. But not like any sucking-dove sang Jake, no half-hearted melody was his. He had a fine rasping voice, with a low tremulous note coming in every now and then, as a stitch had to be tightened.

The ditty that he sang was no languorous love-song, but a lordly song of triumph, a Methodist psalm of the most pronounced type:

"My foes my footstool Thou shalt make,
And from their necks the stiffness take,
While I, on glory, full of pride,
As on a horse shall straddling ride."

Was the foe whose downfall Jake thus foretold a man who wore a flour-powdered coat, and earned his living by grinding corn? Who may say? Assuredly Jake sang with an edifying air of conviction, and as though that royal progress on a prancing steed of the name of Glory were a pageant even then passing before his mind's eye.

Many turned to look at the singer. One lingered leaning against the low door of the shop, and daintily taking a pinch from a silver snuff-box. It was Dr. Turtle.

"A fine song that, Jake," he said; "but hardly suitable to the times we live in—eh?"

"I reckon it's fitter than you'd think for," answered Jake, bringing his awl to a standstill, and resting an elbow on his knee; "you see, doctor, times is bad—bad as bad. Well, the voice within me says: 'Jake, my fine fellow, rise above 'em, cast summat in their teeth, happen they'll flee before thee.'"

"Jake, you're a philosopher," said the doctor, taking another pinch, and gracefully waving his hand to a passing acquaintance.

"I don't know about that," said Jake, somewhat doubtful of phraseology too deep for him; "but I like a rousing song when I'm about it. Most of all I like a rouser when my heart's i' my boots, run down so low it conna get no lower, loike t' weight i' the big clock over there when 't wants windin' up. Well, yon's a psalm as 'ud wind up ony man, if it's only sung as it should be."

"It certainly holds out a cheerful prospect to the singer," said the doctor, with a twinkle in his eye that Jake made believe not to notice.

"Well, doctor," he said, "when things be bad around, it's a help to look ahead and see the sun a shinin'. I tell you what it is," went on Jake, shoving his spectacles up among his hair, and looking round to make sure the boy wasn't listening; "things i' Becklington be's about as bad as they can be. I was minded this mornin' to think as the end of all things was at hand."

"The end of the world?" said the doctor.

"Ay," said Jake, "the end of the warld, and a' things in 't."

Dr. Turtle shook his head smilingly.

"No, no, Jake; let us not think such thoughts as these, with that fair young creature standing on the threshold of a long and glorious reign."

Here he took a long and emphatic pinch from the silver box, and drew a long and emphatic breath.

"Is it Queen Victory you're driving at?" said Jake, with his head on one side like an inquisitive bird. "Her as wur crowned i' the month when t' roses were a penny a bunch on market-day?"

"Yes, yes," cried the doctor with enthusiasm; "crowned in the month of roses—a foreshadowing, Jake, of the rosy pathway her feet are destined to tread."

"There's some of her subjec's as are na' having a rosy time of it just now down this way, anyhow," said Jake. "I reckon Queen Victory 'ud be main sorry if she knew how things be going in these parts—ay, that would she. She's a kindly face o' her own, and a gentle 'art in her bress to feel for them as is sad and sorry, has Queen Victory, and I wish as some chap were goin' up Lunnun way, and could tell her how the miller's for grinding more besoide his corn. He'd get a tellin' orf, I reckon, as 'ud last him a' his loife, and learn to sing sma', bein' so rebuked by them as sit in high places."

Dr. Turtle had not heard the latter part of this discourse.

He was wrapt in a sort of wordless ecstasy — a delirium of loyalty—taking minute pinches of snuff, airily, as though tossing off imaginary toasts. Was it not known in Beckington, from one end to the other, how devoted to the reigning girl-queen was that man of elegance, Dr. Turtle? Had it not been told how, on one occasion, when writing one of his many prescriptions for Mrs. Geoffrey, he had begun it thus:

"Take one Queen of Roses——"

Jake thought it was high time to bring the doctor out of his reverie. Were there not many things to hear and to learn?

"You've had a baddish time of it lately, yourself, sir. It stands to reason it conna be a pleasant thing for a man to be lugged out of his warm bed i' t' middle o' t' night, to look at a drownded man's eyes starin' at nothin'."

"Mere accidents of the profession, Jake," said the doctor, dusting the frill of his shirt as he spoke; "mere accidents of the profession. But still, it was a sad sight—a sad sight! Then I had to go and break the event to Mr. Geoffrey, and, he, naturally, felt it a good deal, the sad event being, as it is, so intimately connected with the bank robbery. Indeed (this in confidence) I fear a relapse. It seemed to take great hold of him. As to his wife—a woman so fragile, Jake, you might blow her away like a feather——"

"If I wur Maister Geoffrey," put in Jake, "I'd give a mort o' money to the man as could blow hard enough—that would I. Why, she must cost him a fortune in doctor's stuff, let alone being such a wangling feckless kind of a body to have about the house."

"Well, well," said Dr. Turtle, gracefully waiving the delicate question of drugs, "she was terribly shattered, and the quantity of camphor julep——But tut, tut! I am talking shop, and that's against rule. Now, there's Mrs. Devenant—there's a woman for you! Hang me if she isn't a puzzler."

Jake had once more let his work fall upon his knee, pushed his spectacles up among the spikes of tow which he called his hair, and was listening keenly.

"Not a tear, Jake, not a tear, I give you my word: helped in the necessary investigations as if she'd been born and bred in the wards of a hospital. When I laid down the hand I had been holding and looked across at her, there she was looking like—well, let us say, like Lot's wife after that little misadventure of hers in the plains. 'He is dead,' she said, 'stone dead. I knew it from the first,' and then she stood there by the—well, let us say, the mortal remains, and every one passed her by with a sort of creeping fear written in their faces. Not one uttered a word of sympathy. I had the will to do it, but the words stuck in my throat, Jake—stuck in my throat."

"No wonder," said Jake, drawing a long breath, "sorrer

must have turned her fierce. There's critters as goes like that when you take their young from 'em; they want to rend and tear all as come anigh 'em; a hard sorrer's a fearsome sight."

"Her eyes never seemed to be looking at us," continued the doctor, who had warmed to his theme, "but at something far away. The child had come creeping down the stairs in her little white nightdress, and some one was holding her back upon the lowermost stair; you could hear her moaning and crying out to be 'let go.' Ah, Jake! men in my profession need to have strong nerves. If a young fellow comes to me and says, 'Shall I enter the medical profession?' I answer his question by another: 'My very dear sir, the matter lies in a nut-shell. Have you strong nerves?'"

Then, with a cheery "Good-day to you!" away went the doctor full of grave thoughts about Hester Devenant's steadfast, tearless, fierce, defiant grief.

The sheriff's inquiry took place soon after mid-day, and a verdict of "Suicide while in an unsound state of mind" was returned.

As if Mr. Devenant had ever been in any other state of mind than an unsound one, said Becklington generally. Some compassionate souls added, that they were glad the law had been lately modified as to the burial of suicides, whereby Gabriel Devenant, the half-crazy foreigner, would be buried in silence at the dead of night, instead of where four roads met, with a stake through the wretched body he had so little valued, and so recklessly cast aside.

All this was interesting in no common degree, but paled before the reputed arrival of the Bow Street runner an hour or two later.

To-morrow promised to yield a plenteous harvest of intensely exciting events.

What chance had the tragedy enacting in the thatched cottage up among the dykes against such claims upon public interest?

The streets grew all at once full of stir and restless goings to and fro. Groups formed and loitered as they had done upon the day the robbery was discovered.

And secret evil-doers in the good town of Becklington

went heavily, uneasily conscious that an unfamiliar and mighty power was in their midst, and that a sparkling bull's-eye of detection might be turned upon them at any moment, and a resistless arm might drag forth their misdeeds into the light of day.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WIDOW'S CURSE.

HILDA'S home—that pleasant little house among the dykes—was a small cottage-like building, with two round thatched gables, more like two good-sized bee-hives than anything else. It was an unpretending sort of place, and yet people, as they passed, turned to look at it, for the rambling irregular bit of garden that skirted it on all sides was a glory of colour, aflame just now with patches of golden marigolds, but at all times of the year bright and gay with whatever blossoms were in season. Between the cottage and the road stood three apple-trees, in spring-time weighed down by a fragrant load of pale pink and white bloom; now bending under a wealth of apples.

One of these trees stood over against the rustic porch (thatched, like the gables up above); the other two, on either side of the wide low window that looked on to the road, their boughs almost meeting, formed an archway of greenery through which the window peered.

Here, on the wide window-ledge, might often be seen a great shallow brown delf dish, filled with blossoms of every hue, for Hester Devenant loved flowers, and seemed to have caught something of her husband's artistic taste in arranging them—a strange, yet not uncommon, instance of apparent inconsistency of character.

But on the window-shelf to-day was seen no dish of delf full of marigold, iris, and feathery London-pride.

Birds chirped and twittered in the apple-boughs; Hilda's pigeons wheeled about the chimneys, and preened their feathers on the comb of the roof; in the little garden the marigolds stood staring at the sun; the golden-barred bees

hummed in the delicately-tinted chalice of the iris. Nature's colours do not pale because a terrible drama is being enacted close at hand, and never, perhaps, had the cottage among the dykes looked fairer and brighter than on this autumn afternoon, when the window between the apple-trees was a blind unseeing thing, close-curtained to shut out the glint of the western sunshine and the sight of the flowers, and Gabriel Devenant lay dead, in the room where Hilda had sung so sweetly, as she toiled at her worsted web, only a day ago.

A day does the work of a life sometimes, changing all the world to our sad eyes, and ourselves with it, so that it is hard for us to realise how small a space of time lies between then and now.

Hilda had crept unnoticed into the darkened chamber, hallowed by the silent presence of the dead. A black night of sorrow and wonder filled her little soul. No one had taken much heed of her since she came downstairs that morning, hushed and awe-struck with the feeling of awaking to life to find it something new and strange; filled, too, with a bitter sense of loss for which she could find no name.

All day long she had seemed to be in everybody's way, like a little bird chased from perch to perch, and finding no abiding place of rest. A neighbour, brought there as much by curiosity as by sympathy, had been helping Mrs. Devenant to clean up the place that was always clean, so that it seemed as if it were Saturday instead of the middle of the week. The door-step was dazzling with white-stone, wrought in a certain cunning pattern for which the said neighbour was famous. You might have eaten your dinner off the floor of the house-place, and been none the worse for it; and here and there, on floor and shelf, lay little sprigs of thyme and lad's-love—a time-honoured custom when death entered a house, and one that had a touching resemblance to the strewing of a bride's path with flowers. To show that the occasion was a solemn and peculiar one, the neighbour wore her Sunday gown, pinned up round the waist, and covered by a vast white apron, for fear of injury; and all who came in or went out spoke in hushed tones, with bated breath, as though they feared to wake the sleeper in the room that looked out through the archway of apple-boughs.

Thus had the day worn on. Hilda, feeling as though an unlawful liberty were hers, had wandered hither and thither, always bearing within her breast that sense of loss and silence; always listening, unconsciously to herself, poor little one! for the voice she should never hear again; always wondering if *mon camarade* was not somewhere, wanting his *petite reine*, and seeking for her vainly, as she for him.

Then as the shadows were lengthening, and the sunlight began to glow ruddily from behind the pollards on the marshes, Hilda stole into the quiet room where the dead man lay.

Those were not the days in which loving hands strove to make death beautiful; and in truth Gabriel Devenant cut but a grim figure taking his last rest. His arms were rigid at his sides, no flower lay on breast or pillow; a sheet covered him from head to foot, showing a tall gaunt outline of his form in sharply defined lines.

Over the window of the room a large sheet was carefully pinned, through which the light from the sunset filtered palely. One solitary sun-ray had stolen through a tiny chink in the veiling that covered the casement, and there shone dusty but beautiful, like a golden shaft striving to pierce the quiet heart of the dead.

A less healthy-minded child than Hilda might have been afraid of such ghastly surroundings, even though the intruding sunbeam kept her company among them.

But Hilda knew no fear.

True, he lay there stark and stiff, never raising a caressing hand to touch her hair or calling on her name; but still it was himself and not another.

Dead or living, silent or murmuring loving words in her ear, and telling fairy legends of the woods and glades, he was still *mon camarade*.

The silence and the stillness, the broken routine of daily life, the pitying looks that had been cast upon her through the day, all these things had brought home to Hilda the cruel truth that a great sorrow had befallen her.

But it may be doubted whether she fully realised its nature.

She had been sorely frightened the night before, when her sleep was broken into by confused sounds, the stagger of

feet bearing a heavy load, the rustle of many whispering voices. At noon, when strange men came to the cottage, entering the room where her father lay, in single file, and stepping as if the floor were paved with eggs, she had been glad to hide her face in the damp and uncomfortable folds of the neighbour's apron. She was ever so glad when they came out again—still stepping as if on eggs—but adopting a brisk and lively demeanour as they got out of the house, and appearing quite as glad to go as Hilda was to see them go. She hated them because she thought *mon camarade* would not like them to go and stare at him; and when one of them, passing out, laid his hand a moment on her head, and said—thinking maybe of his own fledgelings at home—"Poor little thing!" she was more angry than grateful.

All these things had been sources of wonder and of fear.

Now, wonder and love held dual sway, and fear was not. It had died in the presence of the dead. The future was little in Hilda's thoughts. That the silence brooding over all around her was an eternal thing; that the voice that had died out of her young life should be heard no more for ever; that the closed eyes would open upon her no more, the cold hand never touch and clasp her own—these aspects of death were as yet hidden from her ken.

As a restraining hand laid upon her was the hush and stirless stillness of it all. She looked up at the dazzling sunbeam and thought it had no business there. It might wake him, who was so fast—fast asleep.

Then she looked down, her notice caught by a faint rustling somewhere, and felt a kind of awe and anger at the sight of the grey kitten—foolish hardy creature!—playing with a ball of darning-worsted under a chair, coquetting with the leg of the chair to get at it, tapping it with a playful paw, making believe it was a mouse and in danger of escaping.

Puss had followed her little mistress into the darkened chamber, and saw no harm in whiling away the time by a bit of a game with the ball of wool left there unheeded since the day before; but Hilda—gravely scandalised—stooped to catch the culprit, huddled it into her apron, and, so laden with a little purring freight, went up close beside the figure

on the stretcher-bed, and drew the covering gently, not timidly, aside.

How lonely he looked lying like that! And, oh, how cold he was! Her soft palm touching the marble cheek crept with the contact. Still, it was pity and not fear that made her breath come in a little sob. His hair was dank and clammy; his lips had no smile for his *petite reine*. How strange—how strange it all was!

That warm bundle of fur that was called Pussy and nestled so closely to her bosom grew all at once to be something comforting and sustaining. The natural shrinking from death and clinging to life that is common to all humanity were clutching at Hilda's heart, and yet she could not bear to leave her father all alone.

"*Mon père!*" she said, speaking very softly—for, after all, it might be wrong to try and wake him, and a sense of guilt was stealing over her—and then, with a sob this time, "*Qu'as tu, mon père?*"

For all answer came the sharp opening of the door, where Hester stood a moment in dismay, swept the child from her feet, and bore her, kitten and all, across the passage into the warm kitchen. The neighbour was brewing some comforting concoction in a pannikin, bending over it lovingly and tasting it in hazardously hot sips.

"She has been in there," said Hester, setting the child down before the fire—not with passionate claspings and kissings, as another sorrowing mother might have done, but with stern disapproval.

The neighbour almost dropped the spoon into the pannikin, and stared wildly at Hilda, while Mrs. Devenant went back to turn the key in the forbidden door.

Hilda looked from one to the other, squeezing the kitten so hard in her bewilderment that it gave forth a piteous mew.

Why was it a wrong thing to go and see *mon camarade?* Why did they leave him there all alone and try to keep his *petite reine* from his side?

Hilda saw that the neighbour's prospective enjoyment in the steaming contents of the pannikin was damped; saw that "Mothie's" face looked whiter and more set and stern than it had done all day, and that these sad consequences

were the fruit of her own fault. And yet she could not bring herself to feel guilty of wrong-doing; for, after all, she had only been to see her father, being so very, very weary of the long day in which he had had no part.

Poor little Hilda! She had done more than this, though she knew it not. She had twined a cord wherewith another hand should bind her life in a day to come.

A new tide of interest and curiosity set in towards Gabriel Devenant's home and widow that night. Firstly, because it had transpired that all investigations into the bank robbery were to be conducted in the strictest secrecy, so that several days would have to elapse before any particulars of the inquiry should come to light. Moreover, Mr. Alison Stirling, having undergone an operation at the hands of the London oculist whom he had gone south to consult, could not at present undertake a journey. Hence the excitement of hearing how he bore the news of the catastrophe was postponed indefinitely.

Beside all this, that supreme object of interest, the Bow Street runner, had turned out, to a certain extent, a failure.

Not professionally—no one was as yet in a position to judge him in that aspect—but one or two townsfolk had caught a glimpse of him, and reported that he "wasna much of a chap to look at," being low-sized, a bit knock-kneed, and owning no kind of "presence," in spite of the official scarlet waistcoat, which, in a better made man, might have carried some dignity and weight.

These flying reports encouraged evil-doers, leading them to speak slightingly of the rigours of the law, and diverted public attention to Hester Devenant and the way in which she "took" her sorrow.

Which was assuredly a way in which no other woman would have taken it.

Several widows related their experience of such times as that which had now come upon Hester, taking much credit to themselves for the sighs they had sighed, the sobs they had heaved, the tears they had shed, and the vast amount of trouble they had given to everybody about them.

Hester, with eyes that seemed to see nothing near, but ever to be gazing at something far away; Hester, with set

pale lips, and passionless, steadfast voice; was a mystery they could no more read than they could have deciphered a book written in Sanscrit. Long since every one had agreed to call her "odd," to visit her rarely, and discuss her at all points after each of these occasions. She was one who cared nothing for public opinion, for general custom, for criticism adverse or admiring. It was thought in those days a "flighty" thing for a matron to wear her hair uncovered, but Hester's magnificent coils were visible in all their glory to every eye. Other women said it would "look better" if she wore a cap. Those who had no hair to speak of, or whose front parting was like a very broad gravel-walk in a very little lawn, expressed this opinion most vehemently, adding with an air of wounded modesty that there was something "unseemly" in Mrs. Devenant's behaviour in this matter. These remarks and others akin to them were always uttered behind Mrs. Devenant's back, and never even hinted at before her face for, as has been said before, she was a woman much feared and little loved.

In truth, there were many who harboured an inward conviction that she—more or less—deserved the cruel blow that had fallen upon her; that it was a wholesome discipline for one who carried her head so high to be brought low, and taught a lesson of humility.

Hence arose a longing to watch the wholesome process in question, and two would-be sympathisers "dropped in" while the neighbour was enjoying the contents of the pannikin, and vainly pressing it upon the new-made widow. They longed to make offers of assistance in procuring suitable mourning garb; above all, they burned to express a hope that that mass of rippling tresses at the back of her head would shortly be covered by a decent widow's cap; but their courage quickly oozed out of their finger-ends. They sat at the edge of their chairs; sipped timorously, and as if it scalded them, at the comforting mixture; spoke under their breath; got the neighbour to show them the corpse, taking the occasion to ask a hurried question or two when the door was shut; and then departed, dissatisfied with the results obtained, with themselves, and most of all with Hester Devenant. She might feel her loss, they said, but she didn't look like it. It was wrong to judge, but occasionally

impossible to refrain if a thing was forced upon your notice, and shoved under your nose, you could not make believe you didn't see it, since, to suppose such blindness on your part, would be to suppose yourself a fool. We are told to "kiss the rod," but Mrs. Devenant didn't look like kissing anything or anybody. We are told to recognise the chastening hand, but Mrs. Devenant didn't look like recognising any hand at all; in fact, she seemed to regard the offer of sympathy as an intrusion, and really, to get her to answer a question was like drawing a tooth.

Altogether they hadn't gained much by their trouble, and had seen many a handsomer corpse than that of poor Mr. Devenant, who, no doubt, had drowned himself for many other good and excellent reasons beside the robbery at the bank.

They also grumbled that the widow lived at an "out-of-the way" place, all up-hill, too, which made it worse for dwellers in the town; and who could have told that so fine a sunset would be followed by such blustering night, and people be blown about like anything, as their only reward for the paying of a charitable visit, received in anything but a kindly spirit? It certainly was a lonely road after dusk, the road that here and there skirted the glistening dykes, and was made all the more dreary by the occasional tinkle of a cattle-bell from the scattered herds that grazed upon the fine soft turf lying between the watercourses.

Yet it had its beauties too, for the dykes shone like mirrors in the grey gloom, and branches, caught by the wind, were tossed high like plumes against the sky.

Wind-tossed, too, was the long riding-cloak wrapped about the gaunt figure of Geoffrey Stirling as, coming up from the town, he passed those gleaming mirrors under the shadow of the pollards; he walked hurriedly, as one who goes upon an urgent errand, and yet something in his whole bearing seemed to betray a secret reluctance—a shrinking from the inevitable. He glanced neither to right nor left. Holding the folds of his cloak firmly across his breast, with head lowered and eyes on the ground, he seemed, indeed, a shadowy traveller through a world of shadows.

Gabriel Devenant's cottage stood blind and dark. No faintest light gleamed in any of its windows. It looked in

truth a fitting haven for the dead, a place from out of which all life and light had died, and round about whose walls the wind moaned with a sobbing wail.

The little gate creaked on its hinges as Geoffrey Stirling passed in; a step in the house-place lingered at the sound; the door opened, and there stood Hester Devenant, a lighted taper in her hand.

It shone with a faint radiance, showing her pallid face, her lips firmly set in a hard line of pain, her eyes, in which for the nonce all the fire and life within her seemed to burn, fixed on the man who stood upon the threshold of her widowed home, his head bared and bowed with a silent yet subtle expression of sympathy with, and reverence for, her sorrow and her desolate condition.

"Step in, sir," she said; "you are welcome. I felt sure you would come—sooner or later"; and she stood aside to let him pass.

The door of the common-living room stood open. A fire burned there cheerily, filling the quaint old-fashioned place with dancing shadows that played hide-and-seek in the polished doors of the quaint old corner-cupboards.

The mantel-shelf was high and narrow; against the wall above it shone a cresset; a large oak chair (Gabriel's once) stood by the hearth; a low stool near it (little Hilda's); and on the other side a high-backed seat of wicker-work, drawn to the table, whereon lay a heap of something very fine, and soft, and white, together with all a woman's implements of work.

"I should have come sooner, and not later, Mrs. Devenant," said Geoffrey Stirling, warming his hands at the blaze, and looking furtively round the homely yet comfortable chamber; "but for calls upon my time that could not be set aside."

"You have been busy at the bank?" she said, lifting as she spoke the heap of fine soft stuff from the table, and laying it on her lap.

"I have been busy at the bank. I am weary—worn out with anxious thought, perplexed, troubled beyond all words to say. But I felt your trouble to be deeper, heavier than mine—in some sort the growth of mine—and I could not rest to-night until I had been here to offer you a few words

—but few, Mrs. Devenant, for I do not believe in long-winded sympathy—of heart-felt sorrow for your sorrow, of bitter regret for the cause of it."

The fine white stuff was passing through her fingers; she seemed to be shaping it into the form of a loose and shapeless garment, and to be so intent upon its due proportion, that she could not glance at the speaker as she answered him.

"You are kind and good," she said; "no new thing for Mr. Geoffrey to be, as all Becklington knows; and I am grateful, rating your goodness at its true worth. Your own trouble must be nigh as heavy as mine, since it is, more for others than yourself, and to such a one as you, what can be harder?"

He leant his hand against the high mantel, and his forehead on his hand; and she, seeing him so stand, raised her eyes, glittering like stars, fierce, defiant, full of cruel bitter pain, and let her work drop down upon her lap.

"It is hard," he said—more as if speaking to himself than to her—"it is a weary, weary load."

"And yet," she went on in a dull even voice that told of a strain, of strong and resolute self-repression, "there has been comfort mingled with your sorrow, but with mine—none."

"Comfort?" he said, turning sharply, yet not in time to catch the glitter of the eyes that were once more intent upon her work; "comfort?"

"Yes," she answered, speaking with quiet persistence. "was it no comfort in the midst of all that storm and turmoil to learn how the hearts of our townsfolk love and trust you? Was it no comfort to learn the power of your voice to hold them silent—no comfort to see that they felt for you as much as for themselves, as much as for their wives and little ones, beggared, robbed, ruined? Was it nothing to gain such a triumph as that in such an hour?"

He had turned once more to the fire, and she saw him pass his hand across his brow, dank with sweat, as he listened.

"I came here to-night, Mrs. Devenant, to speak of your sorrow, not of mine."

"I know you did," she answered softly, "and I thank you for coming. Many have come here to-day on the same

errand, but in a different spirit—a spirit that has struck me dumb, turned me to stone, stifled the words on my lips, and the breath in my breast. Curious folks, I reckon, Mr. Geoffrey, crave to see how a new-made widow bears her grief, so they have been to see how I bear mine, and have gone away as wise as they came. There was no pity for me in their hearts, no sorrow for the fatherless. They came to see what they could see, to gather news to gabble in, like ducks with their bills in a gutter. One neighbour came to give me a hand to-day—she is just gone; but even in her heart was no real pity. She asked as many questions as she dared, and got no answers; but you, you are different to these, you come to me in the true spirit of charity, as you have come to many another; your generous soul is full of pity for the widow and the fatherless; to you I will show all my heart—to you I will bare my grief."

Half-turned, watching her furtively and with well-restrained amaze, Geoffrey Stirling listened; and again she saw the shimmer of sweat-drops on his brow. For now her eyes gazed unflinchingly upon him—her lips twitched as she spoke, her hands were clenched upon a fold of the soft white woollen stuff upon her lap.

"The solid ground seems to have gone from beneath my feet," she said with a passionate gesture, while the thrill of a terrible grief was in her voice; "the stars seem to have fallen from my heaven; the sun has ceased to shine upon me for ever, and yet my eyes have shed no tears. I cannot weep like other women and find ease; it is my heart—my heart that weeps, and the tears that it sheds are blood."

Geoffrey Stirling almost fancied she had become unconscious of his presence, as she rocked herself to and fro in a tearless agony.

But in this he was wrong.

Hester was intensely conscious of his nearness, and no passing expression that crossed his face escaped her.

That she experienced a certain sense of relief in this expression of her pain, in the wail of this, the first moan that had passed her white lips since she drew her dead from the cruel dyke, may be taken for granted.

But for all that she watched keenly its effect on him.

"What can I say to comfort you?" he said, after the

silence that had followed those last wild words of hers. "What can I say?"

"Nothing," she answered, drawing a deep sigh, and taking up her work again; "no one can touch a sorrow such as mine. Even God cannot give me back my dead. So sorrow and I must keep each other company as best we may, and here, working at my husband's shroud, I must think my own thoughts—they are more like curses than thoughts sometimes, Mr. Geoffrey—and dree my weird, as Scotch folk say."

Seeing him start at the word "shroud," and give a hurried glance at the heap of soft white stuff upon her knee, she promptly answered start and glance.

"The poor have to do many things that the rich have done for them; but, even if this was not so, I would have no other hand than mine fashion my husband's last garment. You have heard people call me an odd woman, Mr. Geoffrey, but I hardly think you knew how odd I was—until to-night."

When next he spoke, it was with an infinite tenderness.

"I dare not, in truth, Mrs. Devenant, try to comfort, even by one poor word of mine, such a sorrow as you have shown me to-night. I would only ask you to bear in mind that if there is anything——"

"There is nothing," she put in hurriedly. Then he turned to go.

But she laid her hand upon his arm—a shapely hand, even though roughened by toil.

"Tell me," she said, "when will the best—or the worst—that is to be known, be known about the bank?"

"I cannot tell," he answered, tossing back the hair from his brow, as if he were putting aside a weight that pressed upon his brain; "I cannot tell."

"Maybe never until the coming of the Day that shall tell all things."

As Hester said this, she turned away, letting her hand fall from his arm.

After which, he still keeping an unbroken silence, she took the cresset from the shelf to light him to the door.

But in the passage she stopped, raised the light high above her head so that its gleam should fall full upon his face, and laid her hand upon the lock of a closed door.

"Will you come and see—my husband?"

A moment her glittering eyes held him; but he shrank aside.

"No," he said; "I—I have been ill—I must spare myself any possible strain or shock. Perhaps I was wrong to come."

With a faint strange smile, Hester let go the handle of the key she had been about to turn.

"As you will, Mr. Geoffrey," she said, setting down her light and following him to the door.

The stormy blusterous night had grown no quieter. Rain had fallen, and the leaves were wet, shining in a pallid fitful moonlight that gleamed through drifting clouds.

Hester, standing at the gate, watched, by this dim uncertain light, to see the tall figure of Geoffrey Stirling pass out of sight, a shadow moving among shadowy boughs and drifting clouds.

And as the distance grew between them she lifted her clasped hands to Heaven, crying in a voice none the less fierce because it was hardly louder than a whisper:

"God's curse—the widow's curse—be on your head—liar, murderer, thief!"

Then she started as though God had sent an angel to chide the utterance of that passionate malediction, for a little hand was plucking at her gown, and Hilda, sobbing, cried to "Mothie" to come in "out of the dark, dark night."

BOOK II.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BOY DAVIE.

At a date lying sixteen years back from the time of the Becklington bank robbery, a worthy couple named Robin had been engaged by Mr. Alison Stirling as porter and general servant, at the then newly-established bank.

The double appointment was by no means a luxurious one since the financial business itself was then in its infancy, and the success that began to attend it partook more of the fitful gleam of April sunshine, than of the steady radiance of June. Two small rooms at the back of the bank were apportioned to the man and wife: the little kitchen lighted by a window very high up, that looked plump against a dead wall and enjoyed an uninterrupted view of a leaden water-pipe and spout; the little bedroom lighted (which really means somewhat an ironical term to apply to the process in question) only from the kitchen.

But Robin and his wife were well content. In eighteen hundred and twenty-two working folk were less ambitious in their ideas than nowadays; and so it came about that the various friends of Dickory Robin and his wife Susan were of opinion that they had come in for a "snug thing," since two rooms, a pound a week, and firing, were not to be picked up every day of the week.

It has been said that Alison Stirling, the senior partner in Becklington Bank, was a just but hard man; selfish, yet righteously so (if such a thing can be), since he defrauded no man. He was not a man who had hardened with time,

but had apparently been born so, like a loaf baked crusty from the first. He was as just, as unrelenting, as bound up in his own success and advantage in these earlier years as in those then still to come. He read the testimonials of Dickory Robin and Susan his wife with a keen and scrutinising eye, laying particular stress upon one qualification impossible to be dispensed with—that they were without "encumbrances." Whether any woman likes to hear her possible little ones described as "encumbrances" may be doubted. At all events Mrs. Robin stood the test, but not without a slight accession of colour, and a (very) slight toss of the head, as who should say, "Much a solitary man like you knows about it, sir!"

The worthy couple entered upon their functions, and discharged them to the perfect satisfaction of all concerned. The Becklington Bank increased and multiplied its transactions, widened its connection, and became well known both in town and county.

And so a year passed by.

Then a strange thing happened.

Two rough fellows, tramping from one sea-coast town to another, found, lying in a corner of the road, a little baby either fast asleep or dead.

One turned it over with his foot, at which it gave a little moan; the other raised the little creature in his strong arms.

It was late, and time was an object. The men did not want to go wandering all over the country to find a poor-house. An official-looking building stood handy and struck them as a likely place wherein to find sanctuary for their unwelcome prize; since, like the kind-hearted sailors they were, the thought of leaving poor baby on the hard bed in which they had found it never occurred to them.

The men rang—timorously enough—at a lurking door down a stone-flagged passage, and Mrs. Robin, hastily wrapped in a shawl to conceal some slight sketchiness of attire, answered the summons in person.

"Here's a babby, missis; we found it lying by the road," said sailor number one, putting the unconscious infant into Mrs. Robin's reluctant arms.

"We be seafarin' chaps on the road to our ship—we conna be hampered wi' a squaller," said his fellow.

A moment more and there stood Mrs. Robin, instinctively clutching the baby, while the rushlight she had set on a shelf in the passage flared dismally in the wind. As to the sailors, all that was left of them was the fast-dying sound of their rapidly departing feet.

Mrs. Robin clutched the baby tighter, peered out into the darkness, saw nothing for her pains, and, being quite unable to close and bar the door burdened as she was, called upon Dickory, who, gracefully attired in a tasselled night-cap and a gown of immense proportions, appeared as might some spirit summoned by an irresistible power.

Susan huddled the little one under her shawl to avoid comment in the passage. Once in the nuptial chamber, into which Dickory had followed her, she closed the door, set her shoulder against it to bring it close, turned the key in the lock, and faced her husband.

"Dickory," she said, "here's a little new-born baby."

"The devil!" cried Dickory.

"More like a hangel," said his wife, kissing the child that lay motionless in her arms.

"Where did it come from?" said Dickory, who was great-hearted and honest, but slow of understanding.

"Some sailor-fellys found it lying by the roadside."

"What did they give it to thee for, Susie?"

"'Cause there wasn't no one else for to give it to," said Susie.

By this time the object of this discussion lay on Mrs. Robin's knee, while Dickory bent his head the better to bring his observation to bear upon it.

It was very small and very young—a month old at most. Its eyes were closed, its little lips apart like a breaking rose-bud.

The barren woman is oftener a truer mother at heart than she that hath many children. In Mrs. Robin's breast a mother's yearning grew as she looked upon the baby's face. Doubtless it was the child of sin and shame—doubtless some miserable woman had left it to the chance compassion of a world less cruel than her own cowardice.

What matter? The child was none the worse for that, was it?

Putting this question to herself, she grew quite fierce.

That night the little waif slept in the curve of Susie's arm, sucking its own little thumb all night for want of something better. Not that baby went to bed hungry. Did not Dickory himself mix the warm milk and water for it, testing the temperature with the tip of his own big finger, and followed in every gesture by a gigantic shadow of himself, tassel and all, cast by the candle on the ceiling?

And so it came to be said that the boy Davie had been, in early life, paid into the bank as if he were money, and retained there ever since.

Yet he did not hold his own, and take firm root, without that struggle which generally precedes the attainment of any position of eminence.

For a time, the child was, as Dickory put it, "onnat'ral quiet, like as if he knowed he were where he didn't ought to be." But the high spirits of extreme youth are not always to be kept down.

One day Alison Stirling espied a small person of the masculine gender beating on a tin canister with a stick, and evidently looking upon himself as a soldier of distinction. Another day he heard a heavy thud in the passage, and got out of his room just in time to see the same military personage—apparently wounded in battle—borne off to distant regions in the arms of Mrs. Robin, with a bump the size of a pigeon's egg upon his youthful brow.

Mr. Alison Stirling spoke to Anthony Geddes, summoning that trusty servant of the House and Firm to the sacred recesses of his private room for the purpose. Anthony appeared confused. As a matter of fact he had had the young warrior into his room several times, and had set to work to introduce him to the mysteries of the alphabet; a scholastic course readily entered into by Davie, since Mrs. Geddes administered sweet cakes of carraway at intervals during the studies.

The senior partner intimated that he suspected an "encumbrance" had been added to the Robin's nest, a condition of things to be looked upon as remarkable, to say the least of it, considering the mature years of the parent birds.

"It is, besides, an infringement of our agreement," said Mr. Stirling, folding his hands in his best manner, and

bringing the finger-tips accurately together; "and I fear, Geddes, you have encouraged the thing."

Anthony looked the personification of guilt, and was about to stammer out some reply, when Mrs. Robin chanced to knock at the door, having carelessly left a broom in the master's room.

"Step in, my good woman," said Mr. Stirling; and Susan stepped in, feeling that her hour had come.

"I have reasons to think——" began the good man, and, having got so far, it suddenly dawned upon him that the subject upon which he was embarking was at once a difficult and delicate one.

Susan stood there, embracing her own elbows as if to hold herself together. She was pale and trembled a good deal; but brave as a tigress called upon to defend its cub.

"If it's me and Dickory having kep' a hinfant as you're drivin' at, sir," she said pantingly, "I'm free to confess that things are so, as Mr. Geddes well knows, 'aving taught the dear child his A B C, till it's really quite surprisin' to 'ear 'im, and makes Dickory stare."

"Then the child is not your own?"

Mrs. Robin grew scarlet as to face, and became more breathless than ever.

"I ast you, sir," she said, not without some symptoms of approaching tears, "is it likely at my time of life—the days of merricles bein' past and gone? The child's a fondling."

There was a homely pathos in the woman's allusion to her childless life and advancing years that half choked Anthony Geddes; but the calmly judicious manner of Alison Stirling underwent no change.

"Why did you keep the child?" he said.

The queue that hung down his back gave him quite the air of a judge, while poor Susan seemed not unlike the prisoner at the bar, and Anthony the (exceedingly depressed) counsel for the defence.

"We kep' it because there was no one else to keep it, and because we took to it and it took to us—the blessed lamb!" replied the accused gulpingly.

"There is always the—poor-house," said Mr. Stirling, coughing.

"So there his, sir," said Mrs. Robin snappingly; "and a

blessed refuge it dew seem from all one 'ears. Do you think. sir, as Dickory and me would let little Davie come to such a sorry pass as that?"

"David?" said Mr. Stirling with a dignified ignoring of the abbreviation; "is that the child's name?"

Then he became catechetical, and asked:

"Who gave it that name?"

"Dickory did, sir. He'd bin' reading of King David a-dancin' before the hark, and he thought he seemed a lively and cheerful sort of a pusson for to call a babby after, so we got it christened that way, sir."

"Anthony, Anthony," said Mr. Stirling gravely, shaking his head and looking reproachfully at the counsel for the defence, "this will never do, turning the bank into a foundling hospital. Why, it is a downright open encouragement of immorality and vice! We shall have the place inundated—inundated with deserted orphans."

Anthony stared up at the ceiling in a dazed and helpless fashion. He had heard of it "raining cats and dogs," but he had never heard of a shower of orphans. He felt that an apology was due to the House; that the Firm had been deceived and generally upset, and yet ——

His heart yearned over little Davie.

He had steered the boy through alphabetical shoals and quicksands up to the letter Q. He felt that it would be a cruel thing to abandon him before the final Z should be safely reached.

But he could read no clemency in the eye of the presiding judge. The sentence passed upon our first parents in the garden of Eden was about to be passed upon little Davie.

Mr. Stirling had cleared his throat preparatory to passing sentence (perhaps it stuck there on the way up); Mrs. Robin had clasped her elbows more firmly to give herself a stronger hold upon events. Anthony Geddes had drawn a long breath (as counsel may often be seen to do when they are getting the worst of it) when——

The room door was thrown open—impetuously, not respectfully as became the portal of so dignified a precinct, and enter Geoffrey Stirling with little Davie perched upon his shoulder, firmly clutched by the legs and in a state of

riotous delight. The merry ripple of a child's laugh sounded incongruously in that solemn council-chamber, and the senior partner may be forgiven for the frown that knit his solemn brows. Even the consideration that banking hours were over could hardly show up Geoffrey's conduct in any other light than that of a misdemeanour.

But what a picture the two made! The man young, buoyant, full of life and light, his dark clustering locks grasped by the baby hand, and just above his own gracious beaming face the merry blue eyes and yellow curls of the happy child.

Writing the sad and sombre tale of Geoffrey Stirling's life, I love to see him, just this once, crossing the far-off disc of my story—a flash of light and colour, beautiful and bright—a man upon life's threshold only—knowing not what it had in store for him—trustful, hopeful, fancying that all things fair and sweet lay in the future, flowers to be culled by his hand and set like a posy in his breast—Geoffrey Stirling, before disappointment had soured or temptation assailed—when his eyes met all men's fearlessly, and he thought it a pleasant thing to look upon a child's guileless face, and listen to a child's happy laughter—Geoffrey as we see him but this once, and shall see him never more!

"Really, Geoffrey," began Mr. Stirling—while Anthony shook in his old shoes, divided between adoration of Master Geoffrey and his "ways," and fear of the results of his imprudence—"this is *most* unseemly!"

Geoffrey sat the little fellow down (the child looked grave enough now), tossed back the locks from his brow, fixed a pair of dark, defiant, laughing eyes upon his uncle's judicial countenance, and said:

"Is it? Well perhaps it is; but he's such a jolly little chap, and he lives in the bank. Don't you, my man? Deposit account—eh? One small boy, golden curls, blue eyes, and all the rest of it! What interest do you expect upon him, Susan?" At which Susan laughed and coloured, and said, "Well now!" and blessed herself and the child, and was very happy indeed, consigning Mr. Alison to undignified oblivion.

Indeed, there was every reason to suppose that "Master Geoffrey" had been in the secret of Davie's existence in the

back settlements of the bank this ever so long. At all events, he distinctly winked at Anthony, which made that worthy man at once radiant and uncomfortable.

So Mr. Geoffrey had his way, and little Davie was not banished.

When, indeed, said Becklington, hearing the story, did Mr. Geoffrey *not* have his way?

It was all very well for Alison Stirling to go in for being stern and implacable (no one doubted his capability in these respects.—Just try to overdraw your account, and then you'd see, or try to raise a sum on shaky or insufficient security), but there was no doubt that his heart showed one soft place, whereon was written "Geoffrey."

It being therefore Mr. Geoffrey's will that little Davie should not be regarded in the light of an "encumbrance," but stay on at the bank as a welcome inmate, he stayed.

True, the senior partner always made believe not to see him, never asked after him, and plainly showed that, having consented to his existence, he by no means felt bound to display either consciousness of or interest in the same.

But what cared Davie? He was happy with his adopted parents, rode miles and miles on Dickory's knee, and looked upon the circle of Susan's arms as an impregnable and sure refuge from all earthly ills. He grew familiar with Mrs. Geddes, on several occasions assisting at the chaste mysteries of her toilette, and watching with breathless delight the piling-up of the little heap of stiff curls that adorned her temples; while he regarded her best tea-green spencer (with the waist immediately under the arms) as a garment of unspeakable magnificence, suggestive of high-days and holidays, savoury cakes, and raspberry vinegar.

He also wrestled with the residue of the alphabet, even to the final Z; and shortly after this achievement began figures (always under Anthony's supervision), quickly developing one of those wonderful aptitudes for arithmetic that seem almost like a sixth sense. The columns of figures which he added up upon his slate made Dickory sneeze, so rapid was the process. The fame of his attainments spread.

"It's just enoo' to raise t' yare on a mon's yed," said the worthies of The Safe Retreat; "'twas said the church schoolmaster had gone whoam an' banged his yed agen the waa'

when he see'd the sums as Davie made no manner of account of."

If this shining talent that so drove the good dominie to desperation had been the only thing developed by Davie with the opening years, it had been well.

But we all know that mental by no means always ensures physical perfection; and Susan began to perceive that her boy—every bit as dear as though he were in very truth her own—was what she called "a weakling."

Farmer Dale put it in plainer language.

"The boy Davie's not a crookback—but there's summat wrong wi' Davie; summat as 'ull never be put reet this soide of O-be-joyful-land, where happen the Lord 'ull see to 't."

That was just it. Davie wasn't a crookback, but he wasn't far from it. His head was set too low upon his shoulders; his hands were too long and lanky; his large pale-blue eyes had a wistful look of suffering; there was more of patience in his face than ought to be seen in any young face, and his smile had no mirth in it and rarely climbed higher than his lips. "The sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children." Somebody's sins—perhaps the father's, perhaps the poor unhappy mother's—were being visited on Davie.

Yet were his trials but as keys to open the hearts of those about him; for never yet was the bonniest child that ever stepped loved better than the "weakling" Davie.

When the lad was about seven years old, Dickory, then well on in years, fell sick of a pleurisy, and—despite all Dr. Turtle's efforts—died.

The good man was buried in his night-cap with the tassel at the top, and Davie always thought of him as an angel so attired, wondering what the other angels thought of it. The child grieved—in a quiet un-childlike way—for his old friend, wandering disconsolately up and down the stone-floored passage of the bank after business hours, and sitting by the fire in Dickory's empty chair of an evening, with an eerie look upon his wistful face, as though he were waiting and listening for a message from the dead.

Susan grew quite afraid of the little man when he thus sat opposite to her, silent, and gazing into the glowing embers with that listening look upon his face.

"He's along wi' Dickory—that's what *he* is," she would say, speaking under her breath. "Eh, but they were a pair, were him and Dickory!"

It was the first experience in the child-life of a living, familiar presence fading into that unbroken silence that makes each day's routine a thing lacking something; and who knows what morbid, dreamy fancies might have taken possession of his mind, but for a sudden freak on the part of the senior partner which changed all the current of his life?

"What has become of the—Ahem!—encumbrance?" said Alison Stirling one night to Anthony, who started at the unlooked-for nature of the question.

"He's grown a great boy now, sir," said Anthony: "not very strong, but, dear me, with a wonderful head for figures."

"So I heard; so I heard. Such a gift, Anthony, is valuable in financial life. I propose to send the boy to school—in fact, to qualify him as a clerk in the bank."

So Davie went to school; on which occasion Mrs. Robin became a sort of Niobe in private life. But when she saw him come home ever so much stronger and more boy-like than he had been before, and when she saw the copper-plate hand he wrote, she became reconciled to the decrees of fate, and wished that Dickory had lived to see that day. And all through the days of his childhood, the days of his success, one star shone out for Davie brighter than all others! for over and over again did Susan tell him the story of how Alison Stirling wanted to have him sent to the poor-house, and how "Mr. Geoffrey" came in, brave, bright, and beautiful, bearing him on his shoulder; how he laughed and called him a "jolly little chap!" and had his "way"—as, indeed, was it likely now that any one should have the heart to deny it him?

There was no story Davie loved so well; not even that of the boggart in the marshes, who milked all the cows on moonlight nights, and carried the milk away in a fairy-can, but was always clumsy and spilt some of it, which turned to lovely snow-white flowers wherever it fell, so that the farmers knew which way the sly boggart had gone, though they could never, never catch him.

That was a lovely story; yet not to compare to the one about Mr. Geoffrey! Davie could never see the boggart, but oftentimes he saw Mr. Geoffrey, and oh, how beautiful he was, and what gracious, gladsome ways he had with him!

It is to be feared that Davie was not half grateful enough to the Senior Partner for the education which he had given him, and went on adoring Mr. Geoffrey just as he might adore some bright star shining ever so far away in the deep, blue, silent sky.

So passed the years away, slipping along like the beads through the hand that tells them, and Davie became a clerk in Stirling's Bank.

By that time poor old Susan had grown infirm, and had gone to live with a relative in the country, where it was the boy's pride and pleasure to walk out and visit her, always taking her some little thing or other bought out of his own "earned" money.

The dog Gaylad, who was an institution at the bank, used to go with him; and, if in the course of one of these expeditions the pair chanced to meet Mr. Geoffrey, the lad would flush up high with pleasure and delight, and the dog wave his beautiful feathered tail, and raise his golden-brown eyes lovingly to his master's face, licking the hand that caressed him; for Gaylad was Mr. Geoffrey's own dog, though he lived at the bank, where a watch-dog was considered a necessity.

Davie did not love Mr. Geoffrey the less because he was so changed since the old days when Dickory used to say it was "like sunshine" to catch a sight of him coming into the place; but the lad often wondered how it was that his master now so seldom smiled, and never laughed the old merry ringing laugh that it did your heart good to hear. How could he read the story of a hasty passionate love—of a bitter waking from the dream of a joy never to be? Such lore was a sealed book to Davie. But he could see how Mr. Geoffrey loved the child Ralph, and followed loving suit, spending hours of his evening leisure in carving exquisitely delicate models of ships for the little one, and then bearing these offerings of a reflected love to the White House, and there passing an hour that was something to think of all the rest of the week.

We have already seen Davie, breathless, and according to general report, "wi' a face as white as milk," sent to warn Anthony Geddes on the morning on which the bank robbery was discovered.

A couple of hours later, when Geoffrey Stirling ventured to show himself to the people at the open window, Davie was possessed by a sort of speechless frenzy. Catching sight of a fist grasping a stone, he made a convulsive spring forwards, and would have flung himself between that solitary figure at the window and the possible death that lurked below, but that Anthony held him in a grasp like a vice.

* * * *

Those had been terrible days; but now their memory was growing dim.

For our story takes a leap of ten years, and in gathering up the rifted threads we shall find things and people changed, some marvellously so; and—among these last—the boy Davie and Mr. Geoffrey.

CHAPTER X.

THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH.

WHERE is the wound so deep that it will not heal to a scar beneath the touch of the great physician—Time?

Yet are some scars both wide and deep, showing that the healing process has been long and painful.

It was thus with the Becklington Bank robbery.

For men and women in the middle period of life to awake to the cruel fact that all the results of past efforts have melted away like snow in thaw-time, that before them lies that dreary necessity called beginning again, is a terrible experience. Such was the position of many a one in and around Becklington after that memorable autumn, when a veritable Black Monday had dawned to darken hearts and homes, and drive more than one to the verge of a fatal despair.

High and low, the wealthy, and those whose earthly substance seemed but a small thing indeed over which to make so loud a moan—each and all suffered in the general calamity.

Curses exceedingly loud and exceedingly deep betrayed the fact that Sir Roland Ashby, the squire of Dale End, found himself seriously embarrassed by the losses which he had sustained; almost as much so, indeed, as was Widow Bunnycastle by the disappearance of that small patrimony left to her by Bunnycastle as a means of keeping a roof over her head. Then, to a man of Sir Roland's violent temper and uncontrolled passions, the fact of there being no culprit upon whose abashed head the vials of his wrath might be poured out was an almost unbearable aggravation of his sufferings. To curse thin air, to rave at nothingness, is but an unsatisfactory and unsatisfying form of denouncing one's enemies.

For the Bow Street runner had not only proved a physical, but also a professional, failure; and all those investigations into the bank robbery (which it will be remembered were to be conducted in strictest secrecy and with closed doors) had all ended in smoke—literally so, since the only trustworthy evidence obtained was that of a sturdy artisan of the town, who, chancing to be abroad at an abnormally early hour on the Black Monday morning, had seen a pale-blue film of smoke ascending from the bank chimney.

"If he'd seen what wur at t'other end o' t' chimney he'd ha' done summat worth talking about," said Farmer Dale. "As things be, he moight as well ha' had his yed i' a bag for a' the good as he can do."

Which withering sarcasm, being repeated to the witness aforesaid, grieved him sore, he having assumed a gait of much importance upon the ground of what he had seen, of his interview with the detective, and of the way in which Squire Ashby (with the reddest possible face, and in the loudest possible voice) had pelted him with questions, giving him no time to answer one before he asked him another.

This witness had added to his testimony anent the smoke that about a mile from the town he met a farm-labourer, red-bearded and slouching, dressed in a white smock and

low cap. At which item of evidence Farmer Dale again girded, for said he:

"What else would a farm-labourer be loike to wear but a white smock and a low cap? And for matter of a red beard, Heaven moight so afflict any mon, and he be as honest as if he were of a gradelier colour. If the felly had ketched t'other felly by the throat, and axed him if he'd been robbing t' bank, he moight ha'd talked."

Nor could any subsequent reasoning show the farmer that such a course would have been a somewhat out-of-the-way proceeding, seeing that the person chiefly concerned had not at that time either noticed the thin blue curl of smoke stealing out from a nest of ivy leaves, nor yet heard that the bank had been robbed at all.

The Becklington Bank robbery seemed destined to remain a mystery, and, as a mystery, to be handed down from father to son, and to be talked over on long winter evenings by the ingle-nook, or on long summer Sundays in the tea-gardens and at the bar of "The Safe Retreat."

Of this mystery the two crowning mysteries were—the boy Davie and the dog Gaylad.

That both should slumber at their posts while desks were rifled, safes were forced open, and ledgers were burnt, might well puzzle the wisest pate in Becklington, or out of it!

The second clerk, who lived in the bank, slept in a comparatively distant chamber. The porter who had replaced poor Dickory had been, alas! forced to confess (when brought face to face with that unexpected inquisitor of Bow Street fame), that an extra glass or two on the Sunday night had made him "a bit 'eavy-'eaded"—not drunk by any means; oh dear no, sir, nothing of the kind!—but just "a bit confiscated"; a phrase which appeared to yield him much satisfaction, as at once hitting the condition of affairs exactly and conveying no reproach.

As to the boy Davie, he underwent his examination at the hands of the law with a composure that was remarkable, giving his evidence with the terseness and clearness to be looked for in one "keen at figures." He said that he woke and rose at the usual hour on that fatal day. The dog Gaylad was lying across the door—also as usual. The creature stretched its long limbs, came to his side, and waved its

tail slowly from side to side in a dumb morning greeting. He perceived no signs of excitement or restlessness about the dog. Very shortly after this he discovered that the safe in his room was open, and the keys it always held gone.

He rushed to call his fellow-clerk, the dog beginning to bark uneasily and run about from place to place. This brought the porter to the scene. Soon, as the full extent of the mischief was gradually revealed, all became confusion and dismay.

Having given hasty orders to keep the bank closed and leave the disordered rooms untouched, he had made his way to the manager's house in Church Lane, never stopping to draw breath until he stood before Anthony Geddes, and there told his tale of woe.

Thus began and ended the evidence of David Robin; nor could any sudden cross-questioning, any crafty feint or cunning intricacy of suggestion on the part of the inquisitor, cause him to vary it in one single point.

In fact, after many weary days devoted to these investigations, as has been said before, nothing came of them,

Of course there were false scents which the bloodhounds of the law rushed at headlong, pursued hotly, and ran to earth, only to find that they had hunted *ignes fatui*, and were floundering in bogs of still deeper mystification than before.

Various passengers by royal mail from the North to London were arrested, questioned, searched, and let go again. Endless rustics in white smocks were wrongfully taken up and detained in all parts of the country.

One simple fellow, whom Heaven had seen fit to afflict with a red beard, when marched through the market-place in the custody of Matthew Hawthorne, chiefest of all constables, was so hooted at, groaned at, hustled and bustled, that he well-nigh lost what little sense he had ever possessed, wondering—as well he might—what crime he had unconsciously committed that he should be thus cruelly dealt with? Even when set at liberty and admonished that nothing was proved against him, he seemed haunted by the idea of some mysterious wrong-doing on his own part, and kept on telling the magistrate that he would "never do it no more."

Perhaps he meant that he would never come to Becklington in search of a job again; that being about the worst day's work he had ever done in his life!

Once all the world (of Becklington) was convinced that justice was on the trail of the sinner or sinners at last.

Two suspicious-looking persons (one of the two betraying an evident design of disguisement) were noticed, tracked, and hunted, while expectation stood on tip-toe, and hearts beat high with mingled hope and fear.

Sir Roland was especially hopeful on this occasion, and avowed his resolve of having the malefactors (when caught) publicly shot in the market-place.

In those days flying criminals could not be tripped up by telegram, but had to be stalked from one hiding-place to another, like very game by the hunter. Hope, too, in such cases, died a more lingering death, since resources were not so quickly exhausted.

But at length, in Becklington, hope languished and grew sickly; for the two suspicious persons turned out to be two highly respectable travellers for a Scotch house of business, and their suspicious packages proved to contain samples of various kinds of merchandise.

As for the "evident designs of disguisement" attributed to one of the suspected persons, they proved to comprise in all a tied-up head, tied up to cover an aching tooth and a swollen cheek.

Shortly after this ignominious failure on the part of avenging justice, the sufferers from the sin of some person or persons unknown (and who appeared likely to remain unknown) began to gather themselves together to breast the waves of misfortune with what courage they could muster, and not a few took up their burden manfully, entering upon the task of "beginning life over again" with creditable energy and determination.

Among these, of those in whom we are interested, Farmer Dale and Amos Callender, the tanner, were pre-eminent; so much so, that, when ten years had passed by, not only was "the lass Em'ly" well done by, and looked upon as "a likely wench, and one as wouldna come empty-handed to the man as got her," but that boy of Farmer Dale's, the destined scholar of the family, had fulfilled that high destiny

to the full, and turned out, besides, as steady a man as his father, always crossing the plank over the brook at the bottom of the garden in perfect security of balance, on his return to the parent nest.

Both these worthy men, in their several walks of life, had been aided by thrifty, cheerful-minded, contented wives, which perhaps accounts not a little for the brave hearts they kept in adversity and their success in the evening of life.

Nor had time and trouble dealt hardly with Nancy and Bess. Both were still hale and hearty; while, as for Nance, if she had been like a ripe apple ten years ago, she was only like the same apple ruddier and riper now.

Jake had suffered more at the hands of time. His face had become more wizened, his spiky looks sparser and of a pepper-and-salt hue that was the reverse of becoming. But Jake's heart was still in the right place, *i.e.*, handy to be got at by any who needed help, any who went sorrowfully and were heavy laden.

The windmill still swung its long arms round and round on week-days, and stood as still as a clock that has run down on Sundays. The miller still ground his corn and his tenants; and, like most grasping people, had grown more and more grasping as years whitened his head with a snow that could not be dusted out like the flour when he put his best clothes on and went to meeting, serenely ignoring the mill.

But those hard and cruel hands of his never clutched Jake's bit of hard-earned money that was destined to pay the widow's double rent. Long ere the month's grace was up, help arrived from her own kith and kin. "Patch" appeared at the cobbler's stall all breathless with a load of news; telling his story wildly through the open shutters, while Abel the bad lurked around to hear as much as he could.

They were all going away from Becklington for ever and ever—mother and "patch" and three little ones, and would Mr. Jake please to come up the hill as quick as he could.

So Jake went, with rather a heavy heart in his breast though. We all love our own charitable deeds, and do not like to see them plucked out of our hands by another; and Jake had grown very tender over the little hoard which he had been laying by shilling by shilling, in an old stocking,

to pay the extortionate landlord. He was a lonely kind of a chap was Jake (for the boy could hardly be looked upon as constituting a family circle, could he?), and he had "taken to" the widow and her children. He had fancied they might get quite fond of him in time, and even let him go and take a friendly dish of tea up there in the circling shadow of the big mill when the day's work was done. And now a rich sister of Mrs. Bunnycastle's was altering the whole state of matters. "Patch" was to go to school, and the mother and the three little ones were to go and live somewhere down south.

Jake felt very sad the day he went to see them all off by coach to London, and when the youngest child of all clasped him round the leg (wholly regardless of any lack of symmetry which that limb might possess to a critical eye), and lisped out: "Doo-bye de—ar Mr. Soo-maker," his eyes grew so dim, that he nearly shook hands with the boy Abel —who had helped to carry the baggage, and stood delightedly grinning near—instead of with Mrs. Bunnycastle.

To twist the lobe of Abel's ear, wring the widow's hand, and wave a hasty adieu to "patch"—already mounted on the top of the coach, and taking up the position of the "man" of the party—was the work of the next few moments.

Then Jake set off towards home,—Abel following in his wake, much subdued and grinning no more,—and muttered to himself of life and its vicissitudes.

"It's just as full of partings as an egg's full of meat, and sorrors are so fond of each other they like to come hand-in-hand. Dunnot you be thinking you'r frizzled though, Jake, when you're on'y bein' buttered and got ready for 't pan! What wi' t' bank robbery and seein' Amos and Bess brought so low, and what wi' Maister Devenant makin' away wi' hisself, I thought things wur that bad they'd need tak' to mendin'—but now here's these little 'uns gone, and it's little they'll think o' poor old Jake when they get their bellies full o' jam tarts every day, instead o' whiles and agen when the little cobbler brings 'm i' a paper bag."

All these things happened a long while ago now, and Jake has never heard of the widow and her children; so may be that reflection of his as to the forgetfulness that is born of absence and prosperity held some truth.

"Why 'patch' must be a fine tall stripling grown by this time!"

Which speculation on the part of Jake shows that he had not forgotten, whatever those he had befriended might have done.

These changes that affect the minor characters of our story having thus been chronicled, we must catch up the stronger and more conspicuous threads.

What of Hester Devenant in the passing of the years?

Strange things indeed.

We left her in all the first anguish of her cruel widowhood, defiant of her sorrow, yet consumed by it as by a burning fire.

Time, that softens and chastens all healthy grief, has neither softened nor chastened hers.

Becklington matrons had not been gratified by seeing Mrs. Devenant's magnificent coils of hair covered by a decent widow's cap; indeed, she hardly could be said to wear mourning garb at all. Her attire had always been of the plainest and simplest, and so remained yet without pretension to any show of grief. But the grey came quickly, silvering the ripples of her hair; the lines in her face deepened, her eyes were more sunken in her head—more watchful, restless, sinister.

What once had been her husband was buried at eventide behind the old church in the meadow: the rooks in the trees above cawing sleepily and hoarsely as the little procession passed beneath, as who should ask what strange, weird obsequies were being solemnized at such an hour?

And all alone, with none but little Hilda by her side,—Hilda silent and wonder-struck to see *mon camarade* laid so low,—the desolate widow followed her dead. The heavy thud of the earth upon the coffin broke the quiet of the evening, hushed voices whispered, stealthy footsteps rustled in the long rank grass among the graves, but there was no sound of a woman's sob, no moan of woman's pain mingled with these.

Tearless as she had been from the first hour of her bereavement, Hester turned from that open grave, where lay the one only love of her life. Any lingering softness or tenderness that had existed in her heart seemed to be buried

there with Gabriel—left there with Gabriel. The very men who were busy about the necessary offices for the dead shrank from her as she passed, so white, so fixed, so terrible looked her passionless, unshrouded face in the grey twilight.

She dragged rather than led Hilda home—the poor little one whose sobs almost choked her as she thought of *mon camarade* left all alone in the dark and the cold, hidden away where his *petite reine* could never, never find him more!

What will they do, said Becklington, that widow and child? Their little hoard is gone, swept away with the rest; surely they will be very poor! True, Mrs. Devenant can make lace almost as fine as a spider's web (and to see the bobbins dance and spin upon the cushion as her hands touch them, ever so lightly is enough to make one blink again). But lace-making is a precarious and uncertain trade. The poor woman will find a great change. True, sorrow may be of service to her, may break down her wicked pride, and school her hard tongue to softer words.

It did nothing of the kind; as those who were bold enough to try and break through the crust of her reserve found to their cost. She was as silent, as defiant, as self-contained as ever.

Nor were eyes dazzled by the sight of the bobbins flying beneath her cunning touch, each adding its fairy quotum to a dainty web.

She lived much as heretofore for a time. Perhaps, said Becklington, being thrifty, she had laid by a secret hoard, and now, like the bears in winter, was living on her own fatness. But curiosity was shortly almost stifled by fear. The north-country people are superstitious, and when it began to be whispered about that Hester Devenant had been seen at nightfall wandering among the dykes like a restless spirit—wandering beside the deepest dyke of all, that living tomb from which she had drawn a ghastly prey—it was borne in upon many that there was something uncanny about Gabriel's widow; and had she chanced to live a century sooner, who may say but that she might have been burned for a witch?

Suddenly, about three years after Gabriel's death, it was bruited abroad that Mrs. Devenant was going to leave

Becklington—that the little house among the dykes was in an upset, its few goods and chattels being handed over to a broker, and almost before this rumour had crept through the town Mrs. Devenant had gone.

As she left no friends behind her, no one knew whither she had betaken herself; and perhaps Farmer Dale's was the only voice raised in pity and sorrow for the lonely silent widow, ann the "bonnie little wench wi' t' curly yare an' t' bonnie bright eyes."

Five years later the White House—then long tenantless—was reported to be let. The flower-beds that Jeremy Bindwhistle had once tended (or rather let go their own way in the matter of "making posies of themselves") were got into something like order. The old oaken staircase, where still the goblins gibed and mowed, and the one elf that little Ralph had loved the best, and always touched with a loving hand in passing, still smiled a goblin smile, was once more trodden by many feet. The casement that had opened as Gabriel Devenant flitted like a spectre among the shadows of the trees, was set back on its stanchion, so that the fresh sweet air of heaven might steal into the long-closed rooms.

The banks of the river that ran swiftly by the gateway behind the house were gay with golden iris and tall tapering spires of foxglove: the garden was ablaze with roses, and gilly-flowers, and crimson-tasselled fuchsias, when the new tenant came to take possession, "for a term of years," as rumour had it.

And Becklington held its breath as one man, and gave a mighty universal gasp of wild amaze,—for the new tenant of the White House was none other than Gabriel Devenant's widow, and the slender bright-eyed girl, reaching nearly to her mother's shoulder none other than his daughter Hilda.

CHAPTER XI.

YIELDING PLACE TO NEW.

After all there was nothing particularly strange or supernatural in Mrs. Devenant's departure from and reappearance in Becklington. The whole matter was quite easy of ex-

planation if any one had known the circumstances of the case.

But then nobody did.

So, since putting Hester to the question was an idea not to be entertained by the boldest gossip in the town, conjecture ran riot, and the wildest suppositions were entertained.

The plain truth was this:

After nearly three years of quiet, self-centred life—life unbroken by any ripple of change of disturbance, the eventless routine of existence at the cottage among the dykes was stirred by the coming of a foreign letter.

It was addressed to the man who had become long since but a name and a memory. It was written in French, and dated from Paris.

Hester, with Hilda's help, spelt it out by the aid of a dictionary; found it came from an old and eccentric uncle of her husband's, and, by way of answering it, packed up her own and Hilda's personal effects, handed over the furniture to the tender mercies of the broker, paid a solitary farewell visit to the grave behind the church, and set off by mail-coach to London.

No one in Becklington had any knowledge of a more extended journey lying before the pair, or tongues would have wagged even quicker than they did; for a journey to France appeared as a desperate kind of undertaking in the eyes of Becklington, and a thing to render for ever memorable the life of which it formed an episode.

Desperate or not, the journey was accomplished in safety, and the travellers received with effusion by a little withered old man, like a dry and sapless branch whose last spring had become a thing of the past.

Were not this mother and daughter the only relics left to him of "*ce pauvre cher Gabriel*," of whose tragic death he now heard for the first time.

The old man's broken English made Hilda laugh, and then clasp him round the neck as if to heal with the touch of her tender arms the wound she feared to have made in his vanity; while her pretty efforts after fluency in the tongue that had been her father's yielded such delight to M. Lemaire that he had to send for the old servant Babette to

share it. Babette (an ancient dame with black teeth, a skin like faded parchment, and a heart as tender as a spring chicken) would clap her hands and cry *Mon Dieu que c'est beau ça!* But for all these antics Hester had no smile. In soft caress and happy jest she had no part. She dwelt alone in a self-made isolation, her grave reserve calling up some fear in the old man's mind; indeed, he addressed her at times with a trembling chivalry, no doubt looking upon her in the light of a marvellous and terrible production of "perfidious Albion."

It presently appeared that the handsome silent widow of *ce pauvre cher Gabriel* had a cherished and secret mission to perform; a mission which must be absolutely accomplished before she could know any true repose of mind.

M. Lemaire grasped the position at once—spasmodically indeed. A person with a "mission" was naturally different to other people. A person with a mission could not be reasoned for. Nothing could be more consistent than that such an individual should wish to go to some indefinite place *à l'autre bout du monde*. This last remark he made with a sketchy movement of the hands as indicating a desire on the part of the person with a mission to fly off into space.

The carrying out of such desires necessitated wings. Wings, put practically, meant money. Money was at his dear niece's disposal to any extent; whom had he to think of in this world, save these dear relics of *ce pauvre cher Gabriel?*

Had not the disgrace and death of a worthless son caused him to call to mind his nephew Gabriel, the child of his little sister Valerie, the boy so idolised, so wayward, so dear to the heart of the little dark-eyed mother, who died all too soon.

What more sacred duty, then, was there for him to fulfil, than to help Gabriel's widow to carry out the secret mission that with shadowy finger beckoned her to distant realms?

If any one had told M. Lemaire that this generosity of his was in reality selfishness and covetousness masquerading as noble virtues, he would have been indignant indeed. Yet the truth was, he thought Hester cold and stern to that tender soft-eyed lamb Hilda, and chuckled to himself and

rubbed his skinny fingers together in an ecstasy of delight at the idea of the child being given over entirely to himself and old Babette for a time, while Hester would be safe—quite safe, and, he trusted, in a healthy and genial clime—out of the way.

"Have no fear for that *petite poulette*—give no anxious thought, dear lady, to that *petit ange*. She shall be safe—safe—safe with old Uncle Lemaire! You shall find her with roses in her cheeks, smiles on her lip, and shining eyes when—ah, the happy day!—you shall return to claim her."

Then the old hypocrite tottered about on feeble shanks, busying himself over the *triste* preparations for the carrying out of that secret mission, while Babette laughed, showing her black teeth and clapping her hands, reading her master's mind as clearly as though it were the breviary that she knew off by heart.

It was arranged that Hilda should attend the admirable instructions of the good sisters of the convent of *Bon Secours*, always, however, remaining what Babette called *bonne hérétique*, as her father had been before her; a programme that was duly carried out, yet not without the fervour and passion of her Catholic surroundings setting their mark upon her, tinging the colder creed with warmth and light, and implanting in her soul a love of the beauty of worship and sense of the nearness of the unseen world—all influences that helped to make her the woman she became in a time then yet to come.

Hester was absent a long time. Days, weeks passed by, and the little household of three happy people heard no news of her.

Hilda wondered what her mother was gone in search of. It would have been hard to say how the child had grasped the idea of the "mission" being a search—yet there the conviction was. In truth, she always felt that life itself was one long search to the silent brooding mother whom she loved so dearly, in spite of the reserve that would fain have held her at arm's length.

The question that came to her sometimes as she lay awake in the quiet night was—what were they looking for? She could not separate herself from Mothie in this or in any-

thing else. *Mon camarade* had gone away and left them—just the two of them—to stay always together and never leave each other.

He lay sleeping in the churchyard, with the rooks fluttering black wings and cawing gravely to one another in the tall trees overhead, and Mothie and Hilda had to take care of each other.

That was the way of it.

True, strange memories—broken and disturbing, like the recollection of bad dreams—came over Hilda sometimes: memories of *mon camarade's* sad and troubled face looking into hers; of his arms holding her so close that they trembled with the pressure—memories of hard words darkening the air like flying missiles—of impulses of pity and—yes—anger, rising in her own young heart, and having to be stifled there.

As the kiss that betrays is worse than the blow that hurts, so to have jarring thoughts of those nearest and dearest to us is a keener pain than to think ill of all the world besides; and Hilda shrank from these disjointed memories most when most they seemed to take the form of accusations against her mother. She even tried to expiate such musings by little tender acts of love and thoughtfulness; by sweet caresses, not always taken in the spirit in which they were offered, yet bringing comfort and a sense of healing to the child's heart.

She and Uncle Lemaire had long talks about *mon camarade*, and Hilda told him of the golden sun-ray that made its way in through the sheeted window, and the bold kitten who played with the ball of worsted when *mon camarade* lay sleeping so soundly that no one could wake him. Sometimes she stopped in her pretty babble, and looked wistful, sighing, and twisting her little hands one in the other; and the old man, sighing too, regretted in his own heart that it would have been disloyal to question the child too closely. At the same time he longed to know more.

Gabriel had not been a happy man. Doubtless that bank robbery, and the consequent loss it entailed, had been the last straw to break the camel's back; but the load had been piled high before. The dreamy, beauty-loving, idolised boy had become the dreamy artist, charming—"could Valerie's

child be otherwise?"—but weak, easily made miserable, given to brood over troubles instead of shaking them off. Also, there were few women in the world like the wife he himself had laid to rest in Père la Chaise long years ago—it was in truth a good thing that such were scarce, or men would never be willing to leave earth for heaven—and might it not be that the handsome, superbly handsome, Hester, had been a difficult woman to live with as flesh of one's flesh and bone of one's bone? A tigress is a beautiful creature, but a man might not like to have such a one for ever beside his hearth—bah! he was an old man, but he knew the world, and the *beau sexe* too!

There were women in the world whose beauty made a man mad—drunk "as with new wine"—then, his eyes being dazzled as those of one who has looked too long at the sun, he cannot read the signs of mind and character that are only visible to calm observation; he buys his idol at any cost, sets it on a pedestal ever so high—*et puis*—loud is the crash with which it falls, endless are the fragments with which he finds himself surrounded as he stands—a second Jeremiah—amid ruins that are those of his hopes and of his life.

And yet—here M. Lemaire wafts an airy kiss into space—Madame Hester is a gracious person; the lines of her form are as music, her graceful head with its silver coils, a poem; he drinks an imaginary toast, *Au sexe qui embellit la vie!* then he adds with an ineffable grimace—*quelquefois.*

But Hilda—ah! the gem, the pearl, the flower, will she not shed a tender fadeless lustre on the life of some man—*un de ces beaux jours?* It will be a veritable *beau jour* that day, too; a day that will never know any darker night than the sweet radiance of moonlight and the calm refulgence of starshine.

Seeing her master smile and mutter to himself, Babette laughed, well content to see him merry; at which he laughed again. What did Babette know of moonlight or starshine save that the herbs for the *soupe maigre* grew best when both were refulgent, and were accompanied by a rich fall of dew?

Altogether the time of Hester's absence passed not unhappily. Hilda prayed each night that *le bon Dieu* would

watch over "Mothie," and bring her back safe, and "make her glad to see Hilda once again." A sad tell-tale of a prayer that, and one that made Babette sniff, and call upon one of her many saints. Yet a prayer that was at all events partly heard; for Mrs. Devenant reached home in due time, keeping an unbroken silence as to where she had been, and making no further allusion to the secret mission than by telling M. Lemaire that it was accomplished. For this gracious dispensation he piously thanked Heaven after the fervent manner of his countrymen, and, with the delicate politeness of the cultured of his nation, asked to know no more; a course of conduct which we must emulate, since the time is not yet for the nature of Hester's mission, and the motives that prompted her to undertake it, to be revealed.

Suffice it to say, that, after her return, M. Lemaire thought he detected at times the gleam of a certain fierce joy in her dark eyes, a shade more of haughty defiance in her manner; facts from which he augured ill for some one, who, *le bon Dieu* only knew!

M. Lemaire could only trust that madame would not become *tête montée* in the end from nursing the tigress element in her nature until it should become a thing wild and irrepressible—in fact, run away with her.

Two years after Mrs. Devenant's safe return from that mysterious journey, undertaken in the cause of the equally mysterious mission, M. Lemaire was taken grievously sick; indeed, it soon became evident that he had one of his poor little spindle shanks in the grave, and was drawing the other after it.

Thus, a second time came the sorrow of a great loss into Hilda's life, for all her years still numbered so few.

She saw *mon oncle's* withered face grow smaller and more withered still, like a fading leaf; she heard Babette wailing like a banshee, and praying like a female St. Simeon Stylites, urging upon Heaven her many fasts, her charitable acts, her endless candles given to the altar of St. Joseph from her youth upwards; asking in return for all these holy deeds only the restoration to health of her dear master. She saw her mother, quiet, helpful, capable, doing more work in the sick room in ten minutes than tearful trembling Babette could achieve in an hour. She saw the *curé* mount the

narrow polished stairs, bearing the last consolations of the Church to the dying man. She saw a tiny weasen-faced old man, with a bag in his hand, and is mouth pursed up as if he feared some one might ask him a question he could not answer, steal on tip-toe into the sick chamber, closing the door after him as if he dreaded secrets oozing through any chink that might be unwarily left open; and Babette told her (still weeping, and mingling broken odds and ends of prayers with her tears) that that "estimable monsieur" was the admirable notary of the street next but one.

A few days after this, Hilda was sent for to go and take leave of the old man. The sands of life were running fast away, and the words he spoke were getting fewer and fainter.

Babette—by this time in a very maelstrom of prayers and tears—knelt in the passage outside her master's room, and, as Hilda passed, caught her hand and mumbled it.

"Go to him," she sobbed. "You have been his sunshine. Go!"

So Hilda went.

She trembled, but not with fear, rather with sorrow restrained by an effort.

What, indeed; was there to fear in that extended figure, that wasted face, on which rested a placid smile?

Hilda knew that death was nigh at hand, yet that he did not fear it; knew that the crucifix hanging opposite his bed told of the sure and certain ground upon which his hope was stayed. She bent to kiss him, and at the touch of her lips his eyes unclosed, his cold hand groped for hers.

"I have waited for you long—you have come to me at last—Marie."

He was speaking of his dead wife—the woman like whom the world held so few—and, in the utterance of those tender words of greeting, died—doubtless to find in very truth her for whom he had "waited long."

It was found that M. Lemaire had left all his earthly possessions to Hilda Devenant, "my beloved and precious grand-niece, to be held in trust for her by her mother Hester, widow of Gabriel Devenant, the son of my dear sister Valerie."

At this news Babette ceased weeping and praying to clap

her hands: then proceeded, as before, to besiege high Heaven—this time for the rest and peace of the soul of the departed.

For a time, Mrs. Devenant decided to remain in Paris, and Hilda was to continue under the care of the good Sisters of *Bon Secours*. Year after year passed on, and Hilda grew into a tall and slender maid, with two long plaits of sunny brown hair hanging down her back, and tiny ruffled locks, rippling about her brow, with the grave, sweet eyes of the child who had sung at her work in the sunshine, and the sensitive lips of the mouth that had trembled beneath the last kiss given by *mon camarade* to his *petite reine*.

The gentle nuns, whose stunted lives could know no tender grace of motherhood, loved the young English maiden with a fond devotion, teaching her all womanly and graceful arts, leading her passionate love of music into sacred paths, and imbuing her mind with the loveliness of self-abnegation, and a life lived rather to make others happy than to grasp at happiness for ourselves.

In saying that Hester Devenant had left no friend behind her in Becklington, we were, perhaps, hardly stating things fairly. She had left one—the boy Davie; now more than boy, yet spoken of as "the boy Davie" from mere force of habit.

Hester, with the ripe and gracious witchery which a beautiful woman many years his senior can often exert over a youth just entering manhood, had won over Davie to be her staunch friend and henchman. When one who is cold to all the world beside is genial to us alone—when one who keeps all others at arm's-length beckons us alone near, what a sweet spell dwells in smiling lip and clasping hand!

That which is common to all cannot be looked upon in the light of a thing very precious; but sweet is that possession in which no other claims a part. We are bound hand and foot; the fruit that has been kept for our hand, and ours alone, to pluck is sweet with a sweetness beyond all other.

During the last three years that Hester Devenant had lived at the cottage among the dykes the boy Davie was often a guest by the ingle-nook where Gabriel once was wont to sit and dream—often entrusted with the care of Hilda when she

went searching for wild flowers among the marsh lands, or hunting for traces of the sly boggart who milked the cows in the moonlight. Davie constituted himself the child's playmate, carving toy-dolls for her out of whitewood, as he had carved toy-ships for Master Ralph. Then, when the little one was gone to bed, he would sit and chat with Hester—Hester always busy stitching, knitting, or plying those marvellous bobbins of hers, that flew like tiny shuttles from her hand, while the fairy web of delicate lace grew.

They talked of all things under the sun; but, as the needle to the pole, as the thoughts of a lover to his mistress, Davie's mind had a way of taking one direction, his words of drifting towards one subject, and that—"Mr. Geoffrey."

The boy was naturally enough flattered by Mrs. Devenant's notice; naturally also he took a simple boyish pleasure in watching her as she worked, she being so fair to see, and fairer for him than others, because more gentle; but what drew his passionate heart out to her most of all was her liking to hear of Mr. Geoffrey.

How often did Davie tell the story of Mr. Alison's indignation at his existence, of that gentleman's wish to send him to the poor-house, and then the coming in of the younger partner with the little waif and stray perched like a bird upon his shoulder!

It was a beautiful story, and lost nothing in the telling from Davie's kindling eyes and eager face.

Of course people in Becklington questioned him not a little about the tenant of the house among the dykes. Of course, also, they got nothing out of him. Nature occasionally makes a gentleman or two without the intervention of art; and Davie was a striking example of this workmanship. However, even this unique friendship of Mrs. Devenant's apparently had its limits, for when she and Hilda left Becklington Davie knew no more of her ultimate destination than anyone else; and, though his young heart swelled to bursting, and he couldn't see little Hilda's face for tears as he kissed her good-bye, he was too proud to ask for a confidence pointedly withheld.

In course of time Mrs. Devenant wrote to him, asking him to write to her now and then, and tell her how the old place was getting on. But she gave no more definite address

than a poste-restante, and said no more of Hilda than that "the child was well."

Davie wrote, as in duty bound, and his letters, like his talk in the old times, betrayed a strong inclination to stray into the subject of "Mr. Geoffrey."

To judge by the eagerness with which Hester read these letters—read, re-read, and read again every line of them—the subject did not weary her.

At length came one which seemed to contain some item of news that stirred her into new life and energy; and shortly the fiat went forth that Hilda must bid adieu to her dear nuns of *Bon Secours*.

She and her mother were to go back to Becklington.

It has been already told how they entered upon possession of the White House, a home that had been long tenantless; how the town gaped and the country stared, and Hester Devenant cared for neither.

What changes have the passing years wrought in her?

Time has changed her hair in colour, but in nothing else. It is soft and abundant as ever, but silver-white, ruffled, and curled about her brow like a girl's, and bringing out in wonderful relief the deep set black eyes that watch the world from beneath clearly-defined and level brows.

Her form is slenderer than of yore, as if the restless spirit within had worn it away; but all the old grace of movement is there still, and her hands have grown white and fair, "like a lady's," says Becklington with a shrug.

A square coif of black lace rests upon her snowy locks; her dress is simple as ever, but richer in material.

"Mrs. Devenant thinks she is quite the lady nowadays—though Lord knows where she's got the money from to do it on!—and has no mind to remember as there's them i' this town as has seen her white-stone her own doorstep," said she who had once made savoury compound in a pannikin on a certain trying occasion when nature needed such like comfort and support; and so speaking had no faintest conception of the inborn gentle-womanhood that is ashamed of nothing, and can never—in whatever caste or class it may be found—be less than a thing true and complete.

As to Hilda the most stupendous ideas were promulgated.

She could embroider (so said that blatant hussy Rumour) so that one might fancy some one had just flung the flowers down upon the satin and left them there; she could speak in French as easy as the rooks in the old rookery could caw; while, as for singing, it was a fine thing to pass by the White House when the window was set back and the wind blowing up from the river, for you could hear her like a bird in a tree in pairing-time, and the piano-music trickling from her finger-ends at the same time.

All the same, she had been taught all these fine things by a pack of wicked heathen nuns; and was doubtless herself a Papist at heart.

CHAPTER XII.

FORTUNE'S WHEEL.

Such was the hold that Geoffrey Stirling, junior partner in the Becklington Bank, had over the hearts and sympathies of the people by whom he was surrounded, that, before those craftily conducted investigations that ended in nothing were fully concluded, it was mooted whether no possibility existed of enough depositors coming forward to set the banking business once more afloat.

Even Sir Roland, amid those curses loud and curses deep with which in his wrath he pelted the impalpable air, had ready a hot and spasmodic sympathy for the master of the White House, and his delicate ailing wife; "a creature like a bit of egg-shell china, more fit to be looked at than handled, and needing every comfort money can give to keep the life in her—ought to be kept under a glass case instead of having to rough it, as may be she must now—poor soul!"

Beauty in any shape always appealed to the hearty old squire, and Mrs. Geoffrey's dainty, faded loveliness had enlisted his sympathy.

"It's hard on the little fellow too," he said; "by gad! a boy that any father might be proud of. It's no wonder Geoffrey worships the ground he sets his little foot on."

Since any water which Sir Roland saw fit to throw upon the scheme for bolstering up and resuscitating the bank was only tepid, not cold, the design might have gathered consistency and become an organised plan, but for the sudden and unlooked-for news of Alison Stirling's death in London.

It appeared that the excitement of ill-news, the wound got by a nature that had been strict and honourable in every dealing throughout a long and active life, had caused such mental disturbance that erysipelas in the head had supervened upon the operation before alluded to as having been performed upon the eyes. Muttering of figures, ledgers, deposit accounts, interest due, and such like topics —always fancying himself called upon to pay over vast sums, to meet which demands he had little or nothing in hand—Alison Stirling passed away.

Not, however, before his nephew Geoffrey had, by travelling post-haste down south, reached his bedside, and been recognised by a faint and fitful smile. After that, as though some chord were set vibrating by the sight of a familiar face, and the sound of a well-loved voice, one name was for ever on the dying man's tongue.

"Ralph—what of Ralph?" he would whisper, with weary head moving from side to side; "poor little fellow! Geoffrey —Geoffrey—what of Ralph?"

Then the gleam of consciousness would fade, like a sun-ray behind a cloud, and Ralph was for a time forgotten, as vague disquieting fears and recollections of spectral liabilities crowded, a motley, ghostly crew, upon the darkening mind.

Thus died Alison Stirling, and was buried; and Becklington stood by, in a calm surprise born of a succession of astonishing events, as might a man stunned into stupor by a shower of missiles.

After this all idea of resuscitating the banking business died out, and the squeezed-up building in the corner of the market-place was purchased by a steamship company. Mr. Geoffrey avowed his determination of retrenching all expenses and living in the simplest manner possible (indeed nothing but simplicity was possible) upon the small fortune inherited, some years back, by his wife from her father.

This, with management, would keep up the White House and educate little Ralph, and in time doubtless Mr. Geoffrey would "take to" some other mode of adding to his income.

If he did so, none knew wherein that mode consisted. He went often to London, or at least what was considered often in those days. He lived abstemiously; displayed little yearning for the society of any one beyond his wife and child; and Dr. Turtle, with significant shaking of the head and emphatic pinches of snuff lingeringly inhaled, said to confidential friends that Geoffrey Stirling was more shaken than he (Dr. Turtle) liked to realise, by that sad business—"quite so; you understand to what I allude?—exactly so."

Anthony Geddes, meanwhile, was like a dove without an ark, or a dog who has lost his master. The Firm had melted away, the House no longer existed, and the poor old fellow felt as though the solid ground beneath his feet had suddenly turned to bog-land, and the stars in their courses come to a sudden full stop and toppled over into space. A wealthy corn-factor in the town offered him the post of book-keeper, and Anthony accepted the post, for the "missus" must be kept in comfort in her old age, and, if she had been torn away from the square house with its dual square gardens, she would have dwindled and drooped like a plant transplanted into uncongenial soil.

But Anthony never went heart and soul into his new work. He did it well from the mere mechanical habit of doing whatever his hand found to do with the best energies God had given him; but he was a corn-factor's book-keeper under protest, and with his outer shell only. Inwardly he was still the manager of Stirling's Bank, and all his old geniality and fervour only woke into life fitfully—that is, whenever he chanced to meet Master Geoffrey.

The boy Davie went to lodge with Mr. and Mrs. Geddes, and was cajoled by the blandishments of the latter into doing a little amateur gardening in the summer evenings, such as pruning the standard roses, or leading the honeysuckle in the way it should go—above and around the porch.

Davie had readily obtained an accountant's place in a

mercantile house, and, though Anthony shook his head (looking upon commercial enterprise as a sad come-down after financial), showed signs of making a name for himself among the merchants of the place, and being one day promoted to greater things. But, for all this, he still looked upon Geoffrey Stirling as his "master"; still carved pretty toys for Ralph out of white wood; and still spent occasional hours of delight and joy unspeakable at the White House, where, having been duly introduced to the smiling goblin on the stairs, he became quite familiar with that household god.

Mrs. Geoffrey, as might have been expected, took all the troubles that had come upon her in very ill part indeed. Was she not a woman with some pretension to elegance? Had she not been the first person in Becklington to introduce the now fashionable spoon-dish as an adjunct to the mahogany tea-board? Was not her hair always dressed at least six months in advance, with regard to style, of that of any other female head in the town or out of it? Had not her calash been spoken of as more modish and becoming than any other headgear of its kind?

Such pretensions as these were not things to be lightly foregone, nor yet could they be indulged in satisfactorily without an audience.

The secluded life now clung to by her husband was, therefore, a most obnoxious thing in Mrs. Geoffrey's eyes, and more than once did she burst into tears just as Nurse Prettyman succeeded in piling her soft curls of pale fair hair to an unprecedented height, as who should say: "Of what use is all this fair adornment, since I live the life of a mole in its burrow?"

It must be allowed that Geoffrey Stirling tried all he could to shift the burden of the changes that had come upon them on to his own shoulders, and that a very small portion of curtailment in luxury fell to his wife's share; while, as to his gentleness to, and ceaseless tendance of, her, his never-failing patience with her fretful repining and hourly self-pityings, Nurse Prettyman felt that uplifted hands and upraised eyes were alone capable of adequately expressing them.

"Was ever such a husband seen!" cried Becklington.

And thus two years passed on. New subjects of general interest arose, jostling aside the old. The wound was healing to a scar; the bank robbery was becoming a memory—not forgotten, but ill-defined, its outlines blurred, its smaller details growing dim.

Even Gabriel Devenant's tragic end was seldom alluded to in any more definite manner than by the adjective "poor" being used as a prefix to his name; while over Alison Stirling's grave flowers grew thick, planted and tended by the hand of old Anthony, as a sort of last tribute to the past glories of the House, and the one-time importance of the firm.

Meanwhile, at Dale End, things had been going badly. They had not gone so remarkably well before the bank robbery that they could afford to take a worse turn after it. Yet it seemed as if a cloud of ill-fortune, darker and denser than any that had preceded it, fell upon the old squire and his household as a melancholy sequel to the losses then sustained. The beautiful fellow with the star shining on his breast, whom little Ralph loved to look upon, the son and heir of the ancient house of Ashby, went from bad to worse, dragging down with him the fortunes of his kith and kin. Idle days and roystering nights followed each other in fell succession. Finding Becklington too limited an area for his debaucheries, the young fellow betook himself to London, there plunged into the wildest excesses, and was rescued "by the scruff o' his neck," as Farmer Dale put it, by the family solicitor; but not without heavy mortgaging of the family acres, and considerable dipping into the family coffers.

"He was nigh bein' sent over the high seas—transported, as I hear," said the chief constable, speaking as one versed in criminal records, and choke-full of trials, sentences, and the like.

"If I'd ha' been t' ould squoire, I' ha' let 'un be transported," said Farmer Dale; "happen' it 'ud had done him good to work for his victuals once in a way, and I tell you what it is—t'ould squoire's a noisy chap, and can bellow as loud as my short-horn bull when he's put out, but his heart's breakin' wi'in him, same as if he wer' t' peakiest weasen-faced felly i' Becklington—aye, that is it! As for Miss

Alice, she's as like her own ghost as two peas; and when I hear her say, 'Grant us Thy peace' of a Sunday mornin' along wi' the rest of us, I'm ready to choke over the next "Lord ha' mercy on us," thinkin' of her poor wan face as she prays for what the Lord has set far from her. Aye, but it's a good thing, and a thing to make glad over, as t' lad's mother lies where the ill words spoke of her boy conna reach her!"

Truly such ill words were many. Even Dr. Turtle (who as the family physician at The Dale felt bound to make the best of everything, the scapegrace son included) had to admit that young Ashby was misled; and that Miss Alicia's state of health had "lost tone" in consequence. At last, coming from no one knew where, and originating with no one knew whom, a strange suspicion crept about, and in and out, and into this house and that, that Squire Ashby's son had had some hand in the bank robbery.

Such an idea was never mooted openly; never discussed in conclave at The Safe Retreat, talked over across counters, or "across the walnuts and the wine;" but it was hinted at with bated breath, and, when next Sir Roland's son visited home, few caps were lifted as he passed through the streets of Becklington, and Jake was so engrossed with his cobbling when the young squire bade him "good day" that he forgot to return the salutation.

"Turtle," said the object of these slights to the family doctor, "what the devil do the townsfolk mean by such conduct—eh? That little weasel, Jake the cobbler, made believe he didn't see me to-day, and when I went into the bar of The Safe Retreat last Saturday, the place emptied like a leaking cask."

Dr. Turtle, having no explanation to give, could only bow and take a pinch out of his silver box.

How the rumour in question reached the ears of Sir Roland himself no one knew, but reached them it did; and Miss Alicia, coming into the gun-room, found the poor old fellow sitting by the table with his face buried in his hands. The poor woman, frightened and trembling, came to his side, and laid her hands upon his shoulder.

The cruel story had made its way to her also, and, as she sat in the old square pew in the chancel of a Sunday, she

scarce dared raise her eyes from the book in her hand, and could only raise her heart in prayer to the Heaven that seemed so far away, and the God who seemed to have forgotten her.

Now—it came upon her like a blow to see that her father, too, knew of that silent accusation.

"Father," she said, bending down to him tenderly—"dad—what is it?"

He raised his head, lifting to hers the haggard eyes that were full of mingled wrath and pain.

"It's this, my girl," he said, bringing his fist down upon the table like a sledge-hammer, "it's this—I wish you and I were out of this damned place never to set foot in it again!"

And then Sir Roland broke out crying like a child.

It is often just when our cup of sorrow seems full to the brim that God's hand pours in the drops that cause it to overflow.

Hardly had these days of trouble passed over the heads of Alicia and her father, when news came of fresh evil wrought by the hand of the brother and son.

The family solicitor rushed up north, and, when he returned south, Sir Roland went with him. Alicia, more than ever like her own ghost, wandered about in the beautiful terraced gardens, and under the spreading trees around her desolate home.

She was not always alone. Ofttimes a manly voice strove to comfort her anxiety, a manly hand clasped hers with a touch that seemed to hold the gift not only of comfort but of strength.

For eight long years the vicar of the square-towered church—he whom little Ralph so envied as being the owner of the rookery and rooks—had loved Alicia Ashby; for eight long years had Alicia Ashby loved him. The vicar was a handsome, genial divine, hearty of voice, generous of nature; a man who loved to ride across country in top-boots and spurs, and yet could be gentle as the gentlest beside a sick bed, or when called upon to minister to a mind diseased. His curly locks, slightly grizzled at the temples, clustered about a square and noble brow; his smile disclosed teeth white as ivory; his eyes looked all men fearlessly in the face,

yet could soften with infinite pity when they rested on the suffering or the sinful.

For eight years he had played countless games of dominoes with Squire Ashby, while Alice, moving softly about the room here and there, made him feel as though music were in the air, making the whole world sweet.

When he said to her (it was one evening under the big cedar on the lawn; Sir Roland had fallen asleep after dinner, with his bandanna over his head, and a perfectly unsuspecting heart in his breast), "I love you—but—is there any need to tell you that I do—Alice?" she had laid her hand in his, and raising eyes that shone lambent in the dusk of the shadowy tree, said simply:

"There was no need to tell me what I knew, Cuthbert, and yet I like to hear it. It is wrong and selfish of me to like it, all the same; for, though I love you dearly (is there any need to tell you that I do?), I cannot leave my father, or set any one before him in my life."

Then came a silence which Alicia broke:

"And you"—she said softly, "what will you do?"

"Wait," he answered, touching the hand he held with lips that trembled ever so little, for all his voice had been firm, and brave, and steadfast.

How many tears had Alicia shed since that dear time! Poor eyes, they scarce could shine out in the dusk now like they did then—so dim were they with weary vigils full of fear and dread!

As for the vicar he was waiting still: not mopingly, but with as good a grace as he did everything else; riding as hard, working as hard, preaching the same pithy, practical sermons as ever, and with no more tangible companion in his vicarage than a dream-woman who moved about the empty rooms with the same dainty grace as Alicia Ashby, stood beside his chair of an evening, or came to meet him at the ivy-covered doorway when he returned from a long day's ride to some distant hamlet; smiling a welcome with shadowy lips and the lambent eyes that had looked into his beneath the cedar-tree so long ago. Now that troublous days and dark had come to Alicia, the heart of her patient lover clave unto her more tenderly than ever. What hand draws heart to heart so closely as that of sorrow?

"What should I do without you—Cuthbert?" she said to him one night when a letter from Sir Roland had come to hand, written in such haste and anger as to be scarcely legible.

"I hope you will never have to try," he answered, walking by her side with his hands folded behind his back, an attitude habitual to him; "you are not likely to have to do so—while God gives me life."

"And yet it seems a hard bargain, dear, an unequal one too; for I am not alone in the world, like you. I have my dear old dad, and you have nothing.

"Nothing?" he answered, smiling; "have I not hope? A man can live on a very small allowance of that diet, if he sets himself to do it with a will."

But he drew a long breath as she turned aside to pluck a rose, and the folded hands were clasped one in the other with a strained and nervous pressure.

After all, the diet of which he spoke so cheerily was more like starving than living, and he was conscious of a sharp pang of heart-hunger now and then.

"Do you think that dad will manage to set things straight this time?" said Alicia, anxious and wistful, as they took another turn, passing under the cedar-tree that had been the confidant of their first confessions.

"I can hardly say yet," said the vicar; "his letters have a tone I do not like. My darling—you have been so brave and good all along, you have been such a staff and stay, and dear true comfort to your father all through this bitter time—you will not falter now?"

"But this—this cruel rumour about the robbery? Oh, Cuthbert! it cannot be that my brother had any hand——"

"Hush!" he said, standing still and facing her; "I will not let you harbour such a thought. You have enough of real sorrow to meet, without setting yourself to fight with phantoms. There was not—there never has been—one iota of evidence to connect your brother's name with that foul crime; the thing is a mystery that God will unravel in His own good time, if He sees fit; but of one thing I am well assured: this rumour that so troubles you is an idle foolish fancy, and will pass. You know the proverb about giving a dog a bad name? Well, dear, it is always so;

the known sinner is made a scapegoat for the sins of the unknown.

He saw that she was weeping quietly as he spoke, and thought it well to let that gentle rain of tears flow on. Her nerves were shaken, her mind was strained to the utmost, by fears of she knew not what.

A few days later those fears took tangible form and shape, and Alicia knew that she must henceforth be a stranger to her childhood's home.

Sir Roland had found it impossible this time to "set things straight," without a sad and costly sacrifice, the nature of which a paragraph in the county papers promptly set forth.

"Dale End, with its manor and lands, is in the market. Dale End has a history and an interest peculiarly its own. It appeals to us, as it were, from the dead past. It can tell of doings dating far back in the history of England—in the history of Yorkshire. It has belonged to the Ashbys for many generations, and everyone must regret that a necessity should have arisen for such a fine old property to change hands."

Cuthbert Deane carefully smuggled this notice out of Alicia's sight, and it may be hoped that neither she nor "the dear old dad" ever saw it.

What would they have done without the good vicar when it came to preparing for flight, when the old familiar landmarks, the dear household gods, known and loved for a lifetime, had to be removed?

"I shall always think of the old spinnet with little Hilda seated there, touching the keys as if they were living things and she afraid to hurt them," said Alicia to her lover.

"So shall I," he said, sighing, and taking her hand into safe and close keeping; "and I shall think of the song you taught her, and how prettily she sang it, catching every turn and trick alike of words and melody. Do you remember—dear?

> Love is not a feeling to pass away,
> Like the balmy breath of a summer day:
> It is not—it cannot be—laid aside,
> It is not a thing to forget—"

May be those passionate pleading words found too keen an echo in her own breast. At all events, she put out her hand

as though to ward off something she feared, and stopped the vicar in his too apt quotation.

"Don't," she said; "oh don't!"

He was silent at her bidding.

They were both silent, for the parting was so near that its shadow was upon them.

"I feel as if I should be lost in great, busy London," said Alice at length; "perhaps as if I should be a little glad to be lost—from all but you, Cuthbert; but you—what will you do?"

"I? I shall go on waiting, and feed on the diet of which I told you once before."

There was a little sob in her voice as she answered him:

"Is it not rather a meagre diet, dear?"

"It is enough to keep life in me, and I like it, meagre though it be, better than the fullest any other hand could give me."

By way of reply to this, she lifted her face to his, and their lips met long and closely.

A few days later and the Ashbys had left Dale End to return no more for ever, while the vicar set himself anew to the task of waiting, with only the dream-woman to keep him company.

For some considerable time no purchaser was found for the valuable property now in the market.

Possible purchasers appeared and had important interviews with the family solicitor, but never became actual possessors the while Dale End cut rather a lugubrious figure, with barred windows, neglected gardens, and empty stables.

True, the vicar sometimes strolled in the grounds, or sat under the big cedar-tree to smoke his evening pipe; but he could hardly be said to enliven the scene, since he looked more like a lonely rook from his own rookery than any livelier bird.

One fine morning in the earliest spring days of the following year, Dr. Turtle (newly broken out into an ecstasy of loyalty in consequence of the girl-queen having become a girl-bride, and bearing in his button-hole a spotless bridal flower) stepped jauntily over the stones of the market-place. New and awakening life was in the very air; a faint green mist that meant a thousand thousand tiny spears of spring-

ing corn was rising from the rich red soil. Here and there pale primroses peeped forth from under the hedgerows; while in Amos Callender's window snowdrops nodded their heads at every passer-by, and our old friend the canary—who suffered such sad eclipse one morning we wot of—was singing his best.

There was something spring-like about the doctor too; so much so, that to have seen a new growth on the tips of the hairs that composed his wig would hardly have been a surprise.

Jake, a little blue about the nose (for the day was cold though bright), cobbling away on his bench, was quite ready for a gossip.

"Well, Jake, have you heard the news?" said Dr. Turtle with a suppressed twinkle in his eye; "this is a strange turn of fortune's wheel in very truth!"

"Who's bin' turning a wheel, and what's the matter now, doctor?" answered Jake, whose blue nose made him cross; "as to news—there's bin such a glut of it i' Becklington this last two year, I make no manner of account of it. There's a voice within——"

"Never mind that voice of thine to-day, Jake. Keep thy breath to wish our fair young queen a long and happy life—and wish Mr. Geoffrey a long and happy life, too, when you're about it."

"Why, surely, Maister Geoffrey hasna' gone and married Queen Victory, has he?" said Jake, who was bound to be contrary on this particular morning, and did not half relish having the utterances of that inner voice of his stifled so unceremoniously; "I dunnot see how that can be so, and he with a missus of his own already; for, though it's true she's not much of a one, yet she counts for one—in the eye of the law. Why should I be wishin' Maister Geoffrey joy—eh, doctor?"

"Because he's had a fortune left him—because he's off to London this very day to claim it—because he'll be a man of wealth, of position, of influence in our town from this time forth—that's why you should wish him joy, Jake; and good reason too, man!"

Jake was fairly taken aback this time. He stared at the doctor with his mouth open, and found never a word to say.

The amazing news was true. An uncle of Geoffrey Stirling's had died in Barbadoes and left untold wealth to his little-known and never-seen nephew.

The amount of the fortune thus bequeathed in a most unlooked-for manner grew and expanded with each hour of that day.

Every one who told the story added something to it, until, by the time night closed in, Geoffrey Stirling was—according to what rumour said—one of the greatest millionaires of the time.

"And to think what a silly fule he's got tied to him to share it a'!" said Farmer Dale, slapping his thigh.

They had fine times in Becklington, talking over "Maister Geoffrey's" luck for many a day to come, and hearty were the congratulations that greeted him on all sides from high and low, rich and poor. As to Anthony Geddes and the boy Davie, they fairly wept for joy together before they had done.

Such exaggerated and high-flown ideas of Geoffrey Stirling's new prosperity being entertained by people in general, it did not come as much of a surprise to any one when it was announced during the summer of that year that Dale End was no longer in the market, because the tenant of the White House had become its owner.

All this happened eight years ago now, and Becklington had almost forgotten that Sir Roland ever reigned at the old manor, or that any other squire than Squire Stirling was ever looked upon as a power and a principality among them. For both Sir Roland and his scapegrace son slept the sleep that knows no earthly waking, and Cuthbert Deane's "waiting" was over.

CHAPTER XIII.

HAUNTED.

When first the news became known that Geoffrey Stirling had become the owner of Dale End, that the dynasty of the Ashbys was at an end, and that of the Stirlings begun, great was the stir and excitement in Becklington.

"If oi were yo'," said a crafty neighbour to Jeremy Bindwhistle (long since deposed from his post of head man at the White House), "oi'd go oop t' Maister Geoffrey and tell 'un as owd hands should hav t' fust chance. Happen he'll set yo' ahead o' the lot o' gardeners as he'll gather about him—nay, happen yo' might get such promotion i' toime as for to droive yer missus to church and market i' a spring cart. I've heerd tell on head-gardeners' comin' to such-like up-liftin's—aye, that have I!"

"Ketch a weasel asleep wi' his tail a-fire," replied Jeremy, winking a slow and laborious wink, and moistening his hands in a homely and primitive fashion, as though he were already preparing to handle the reins of the spring-cart in question; "I'm wick, neighbour, and t' missis is fettling my Sunday-go-to-meeting waistcoat, for to give me a countenance afore t' quality, and boldness o' tongue to spake oop strong and hearty i' my own proper person."

So Jeremy, in his own proper person, looking somewhat like a variegated robin, since the vest alluded to was of the species called "flowery," with a running pattern of blossom on a crimson ground,—spoke up to some purpose, and shortly afterwards found himself not only head-gardener at Dale End, but the tenant of the lodge at the big gates, and as prosperous a fellow, take it altogether, as might have been seen in a day's march; indeed the flowery vest was promptly taken into every-day wear and a new one purchased for high days and holidays.

No one in Becklington grudged Jeremy—or "Maister Bindwhistle," as he began to be styled—this success in life; and in truth he was a very different man now-a-days to the somewhat lazy individual who let the flowers in the White House garden "mak' posies of theirselves" at their own sweet will. A sense of greatness and responsibility ofttimes begets energy. It had done so in the case of Mr. Bindwhistle. The subordinates he commanded were ruled with an iron hand. Idleness or neglect meant instant dismissal. When Mrs. Devenant returned to Becklington —under altered circumstances such as entitled her to the consideration of persons of discernment—Jeremy now and again stepped down to see her, looked with a critical eye at the flower-beds over which he once had reigned, and

altogether demeaned himself as though no tiniest plant therein, no microscopic weed, had, in those bygone days, been able to elude his vigilance, also as if he rather thought the "boy" who "minded" Mrs. Devenant's garden was a shirk and a deceiver, and required the sharpest looking after.

Mrs. Bindwhistle's appearance at church in a brand new Paisley shawl appeared to put the cap on the family prosperity, and it was agreed by all that the Bindwhistles were to be looked upon as people who had "rose," and were to be estimated accordingly.

That Jeremy talked of landscape-gardening as though he had been born and bred to that extended form of business; that he sketchily laid out all the surrounding country, and more besides, as he sat enthroned on the high-backed bench beside Farmer Dale at The Safe Retreat, are things that may be taken for granted. We most of us find our ideas expand with our opportunities, and are inclined at last to yield to the pleasing delusion that they have never revolved in any narrower sphere.

And in truth Jeremy might be pardoned for taking some pride in those lovely terraced walks and stretches of emerald turf, with here and there noble groups of trees casting soft shadows of waving branch and bough; sylvan haunts where once little Hilda tripped by Miss Alicia's side, and, in a later day, Cuthbert Deane dreamed of a woman now his happy wife.

There were no such gardens as those of Dale End for miles round. Near the lake, that sparkled like a mirror set in a frame of green, was a rhododendron measuring thirty feet round, and in blossoming-time one dazzling pyramid of bloom, bluish pink, delicate, bee-haunted, a sight to see! People had been known to ask humbly at the gates if they might be permitted to go in and look at it; on which occasions Jeremy's self-importance seemed inclined to go to his head. But as the years passed on the sense of greatness grew to sit calmly upon him. It suited him as completely as its shell suits a snail, and, when he drove in a sort of hooded cart to this part of the country or that, looking after plants, he might have been "born to his carriage," as the saying goes.

Nigh upon eight years had now gone by since Jeremy moved himself, his family, and his goods and chattels, into the lodge at Dale End gates. His companions at The Safe Retreat had, therefore, grown used to a certain pomposity upon his part, that no man took ill, since it was a manner to be looked for in such as sit in high places. Jeremy, like Farmer Dale, had grown stout with years; more florid, too, than of yore: and steadily addicted to waistcoats of violent tints and vivid contrasts.

It was, therefore, a startling thing for the worthies assembled in the bar of The Safe Retreat one Saturday night, in the early autumn of the year eighteen hundred and forty-eight, to see the said Jeremy enter the portals of that cosy haven with listless shuffling gait, pallid face, and downcast look. He nodded to the assembly in general as he took his accustomed place by Farmer Dale, and the assembly nodded to him. One or two breathed hard, but no one spoke until Jeremy began filling his pipe with mechanical fingers that held no tobacco, ramming down nothing with busy little fingers, and staring oddly at the fire.

Then out spoke Farmer Dale.

"Whatever's ado, mon?" he cried, slapping his neighbour on the knee; "has thy missus been thrappin' at thee about summat? Whatever's come over thee, Jeremy?"

For all answer Jeremy drew a long breath, giving a furtive glance first at the unlatched door, and then at the close-curtained window.

Jake got up and closed the door. Serious business was evidently impending, and eavesdroppers must be guarded against.

Fortunately no strangers were present, therefore Bindwhistle might be encouraged to speak out.

"There's a heaviness over thee, lad," said the farmer, again striving to rally the meditative gardener. "What's t' meanin' on 't?"

"There's no heaviness about me," said Jeremy, speaking sullenly, and still absently filling his pipe with nothing; "but what's becomin' in one as has seen the livin' sperrit o' a dead mon."

Each man present projected his head towards the speaker, who thus became the centre of a circle.

"A sperrit!" said they, all speaking at once, while Softie quickly buttoned his shabby coat tight across his breast, as though to panoply himself in the armour nearest at hand without loss of time.

"Well—a ghost, if so be yo loike that better," quoth Jeremy.

"Did it say aught to ye?" asked one. "What shape did it tak'?" cried another. "What were it loike?" exclaimed a third.

"Wheer wur it goin' to?" put in Softie, craning forward so that he went near to over-balance himself, and secretly hoping it had its ghostly back turned towards The Safe Retreat, and its face towards somewhere else.

"How can I tell my story if a' yo' fellys speak at onst?" said Jeremy irritably.

Then he let his pipe fall from the shaking hands that could no longer hold it, making no comment and no lament when it lay shivered to pieces upon the red bricks of the floor.

"Ay, but it wur a fearsome sight!"

At this they gathered closer round him still. They might have been bees and he their queen, so eagerly they clustered about him, Softie, meanwhile, edging a little away from the window, as uncertain whether a ghostly hand might not presently draw aside the curtain and have him by the ear.

"It wur creepin' along nigh the big rho'dendrun tree when first I see'd it," said Jeremy, speaking in a sepulchral voice, as became the theme; "it came upon me wi' a glimmer o' light, so to speak—a somethin' a' i' white. I'd called to mind some young plants I had i' a frame, and lef' open, not thinkin' there'd be a bit of a frost, and it wur late; it chimed twelve from the tower just as I ketched the glimmer as I spoke on. If I had na' stepped out of the way, the thing would ha' run up agen me. It come right at me——"

Softie turned up the collar of his coat, and put his hands in his pockets. Every possible protection was called for at such a crisis.

"What did it look like when it come?" put in the constable, whom the generosity of a new-fangled town corpora-

tion retained in his old office; "was it folded in a sheet length-wise? That's the fashion of them, one and all."

"No, it weren't," said Jeremy, aggrieved that his ghost did not answer to the approved pattern.

"Why lad," chimed in the farmer, in high glee; "this sperrit o' thine ain't nothing no better than Softie's here—time he coom in wi' a face like milk and 's eyes startin' fra's yed, and told us how he'd seen a boggart wi' three legs, and how it made up to him, belchin' out hot burnin' brimstone i' 's face. Don't be shame-faced over the thing, Softie," went on the jolly old fellow, "what if thy boggart wur but Sally Hurdle's cow wi' three white legs an' a black 'un, and she stuck i' a bog and blowin' hard through fear? The wickest of us is took in at times, and a black leg won't show on a shadowy night tho' white ones may."

Jeremy treated this narrative with contempt, rolling a bit of broken pipe-stem about with his foot, and staring hard at the fire.

"If thy ghost weren't wrapped i' a windin' sheet, what were it clothed upon wi', Maister Bindwhistle?" said Matthew Hawthorne, when the laugh against Softie had subsided.

"Wi' a waggoner's frock down to's heels. It had a red beard, an' t' y'are on its yed come down to its eyes. Its hands wur gropin at summat, and the fingers wur workin' same as Billy Hurdle's when he's took wi' fits. It made as tho' it wur bearin, a heavy burden—stoopin' and creepin'-like, and groanin' as it went."

"But how did yo' know it for a sperrit?" put in the constable. Accustomed to question prisoners, he went to the root of the matter at once.

"Because it had the face of a dead mon," said Jeremy; because its eyes were the eyes of a dead mon—same as Gabriel Devenant's, time as his missus pult him out o' t' big dyke."

At this, even the farmer began to think the night was more chilly than he had imagined; while, as for Softie, he was busy meditating what possible bribe he could offer the constable to induce him to see him as far as his own door.

"It must have come very nigh for yo' to see it so plain," said the farmer.

"Yo' may say that," answered Jeremy with a long sighing breath; it looked clean through me and out at t' other side o' me. I tell yo' I felt like a pane o' glass."

"Were yo' feert, lad?" said the farmer.

"Not I!" said Jeremy stoutly; "it would ill become one as is set on high ——"

But the farmer did not let him finish his sentence.

"What did'st thee do, lad?"

"Oh, I was nearer t' big house than my own, so I hastened my footsteps ——"

"Yo' took to your heels like a man!" shouted the farmer; "same as t' rest on us would ha' done—that's about it, lad!"

"Well, I thought I'd make sure as no one at the Dale had seen the sight as Heaven had predestinated to me. 'For,' says I to myself, 'if Mrs. Geoffrey, and she so weak, and frail, and ailing more than mostly this while past, were to hear of such like company creeping among the trees, she'd be skeered to death.'"

"But they'd all be a-bed at the Dale at that hour o' the night," said the farmer, with a shrewd glance.

"Ay, so they wur; but I couldna' tell if that might be so ——"

"Did'st come back t' same way?" put in Jake.

"No . . . ." said Jeremy; "I'd told one o' the lads to wrap a bit o' matting about some o' the young plants, so I went t' other way home—to see if he'd done it."

"Well, it's a rum hearin' this, and no mistake," said Matthew; "an' I hope no word of it may get to Mrs. Geoffrey, since ghostly fear is bad for the sick, and apt to be agueish."

"Well," said Jeremy, turning upon him almost fiercely; "I've kep' it all to mysel' this week past, tho' it's gone as bad wi' me as heavy victuals, and giv' me the shivers i' my insoide past all belief; so dunno be thrappin' at me like as if I was a sieve, and couldn't hold nothin'."

"We'd best all keep it to oursels," said the farmer, tolerant of Jeremy's pettishness, as one who felt that a man privileged to see ghosts must be tenderly handled; "for, as Maister Bindwhistle says, it might fright Mrs. Geoffrey, and she's bad enoo' wi'out that."

"It seems to me," said Jake, reflectively, rubbing his chin, "that the young heir is too much away. It's here to-day and gone to-morrow wi' Maister Ralph; and half the sunshine seems to go out o' the old market-place when he never comes ridin' through on his black pony, an' cryin' out, "Jake, Jake, I say! how's trade this mornin'?"

"It's ill work for the likes of us to set oursel's up to judge our betters," said Matthew, "and far be such from me; but I've often-times said to mysel', if I'd a lad o' my own like Maister Ralph, I'd never breathe free-like when he was out o' my sight."

"'Tis na' want o' love, God A'mighty knows, as drives the squire to send Maister Ralph continual to foreign lands. Why, I've seen a light shine out o' his eyes when he's lookin' at that boy as 'ud go far to bring the tears to one's own," said Jeremy, speaking as one with authority; "and yet he conna' rest to let t' lad bide home; it's edication as he's drivin' at—that's what t' squire's oop to. Why, I've heard tell as Maister Ralph can speak in as many tongues as there's fingers on a man's hand, that have I!"

At this there was a general exclamation of amazement. Diversity of tongues was not as common a gift in those days as it is now, and to the rustic mind such knowledge savoured of fear.

"Yo' say well, Jake," continued Jeremy, pleased with the impression he had made, "that Maister Ralph is like sunshine i' the place. When he comes oop to me, wi' his laughin' eyes an' his merry smile, and 'Jeremy,' says he, gi' me a bonnie one to set i' my boozum," I'm ready to cut the choicest flower o' the lot. Ay, if I'd none but it, and was never to have another!"

"Wheerever's the lad got to now?" said the farmer, taking an immense pull at his pipe, and exhaling a corresponding cloud through his nose.

"Lord knows!" said Jeremy, "it's at th' other side the world, I verily do believe; so far away you can't scarce make out the name on't. And I wish he was home, for there's times when I dunna' like the looks on t' squire."

"Nor me, neither," said Farmer Dale, shaking his head. "He's nobbut a man i' the prime o' life—something about fifty-nine, or thereabouts, I reckon, and he looks more like

seventy. He seemed to grow old-like all at onst, and he's got a restless way wi' him—a troubled-like way. Then see how he's lost flesh! Why, you could count the bones i' his hands; and when he grips yo', it's a kindly enoo grip (what else should it be, being his'n?) but cold to the feel, same as one as is gradely sick. I dunnot like t' looks on 't squire no better than yo' do, Maister Bindwhistle, and yet he's bin as lucky a man—luckier,—than ony that stands i' Becklington this day! Who'd have thought ten years ago as Maister Geoffrey would be squire o' Dale End?"

"Or t' ould squire and his son both dead and buried, and Miss Alicia married to our vicar?" continued Matthew.

"Yet I mind," said Jake, putting his head on one side, and looking unspeakably wise, "that the night afore it were known as them two were to be wed, I'd a candle wi' two wicks, that had I, and the voice within me seemed to say, 'Jake, my brave chap, yo'll hear a tale o' wedded love come mornin'"—which I did," added Jake with the air of a prophet whose predictions had been fulfilled.

"Ay, yo' may call it wedded love too," said the farmer, "there's some as weds and don't love, and some—more's the pity—as loves and don't wed, but them two is set afore the rest on us for a foreshadowin' of what a pleasant place this world may be for them as does both things wi' a' their might, and loves to help others to happiness just because they've got such a heap on it themselves. I mind when Miss Alicia was the sorrowfulest lookin' woman yo' could see, and I doant say but what the shadow of it all is on her yet, and ever will be—but it's a shadow wi' the sun shinin' through it, for all that."

This was very interesting, and highly gratifying to the hearers, but the conclave presently drifted once more towards the subject of the ghost in Dale End shrubbery, and Softie resolved that, at any cost, he must get the constable to see him home that night.

Though Jeremy kept a pretty strict watch for the ghost each Sunday night that he chanced to be abroad at a late hour, no apparition appeared; and so time passed.

Autumn deepened every russet and golden tint in the woods, turned the bracken red and yellow, and gave the earwigs plenty of beautiful houses to live in, in the shape of

daintily folded dahlia petals—gold and crimson, white and mottled.

At last came a Sunday upon which a friendly quartette—Jeremy, Jake, and Matthew Hawthorne, with poor Softie thrown in as a sort of make-weight, paid a visit to Farmer Dale and his ruddy-cheeked Nancy.

What with tobacco, beer, and chat, time passed quickly, and midnight was not far off when the party broke up, while, even then, the jolly farmer insisted upon seeing his guests part of the way home.

Be it fully understood that each and all of the five men were in a condition "to walk the plank," as Matthew grimly put it, in other words to cross the brook at the bottom of Mrs. Dale's garden, in perfect safety. If one betrayed the slightest possible inclination to waver and was glad of a hand slipped beneath his elbow from behind, that one was Softie.

The night had changed, during that pleasant time spent in the cosy farmhouse parlour, from fair to foul.

It was a night of clouds hurrying across the sky, of wet leaves, dark from sudden rain, shining in the pallid sickly light of a moon obscured by a moving veil of mist—a night full of flitting shadows, of whispers among the branches overhead—a night eerie, wild, changeful, yet warm as a night in summer.

Good liquor, and not too much of it, warms the heart without muddling the head.

Jake's heart was warmed so that he sang, as he walked somewhat ahead of the rest, sang stoutly of glory to come and of foes abased.

We have heard him sing this boastful ditty before, though hardly, perhaps, with the same flow and warmth as now.

> "My foes thy footstool thou shalt make
> And from their necks the stiffness take,
> While I on glory full of pride——

Bless all us this night and keep us! Look ye there!"

"There" was where a gleam of something white showed faintly among the trees that skirted the Dale End property, and, even as Jake gasped forth that unpremeditated amendment to his hymn, it came nearer—grew more and more

defined—a slowly-moving figure clothed down to its heels in a long, clinging garment.

"I forgot we'd got to pass by t' squoire's or I'd never have come," moaned Softie, whose legs shook under him.

"Dunna' go on as if thou wert playing the bones to a banjo, Softie," whispered the farmer hurriedly. So poor Softie tried his best to keep his teeth from chattering.

Slowly on and on came the figure, the fitful light now touching it—now leaving it in shadow—now touching it again.

It must be conceded that Jake made a struggle to be as brave as his song. He planted his spindle legs far apart, as who should say: "They arna' much to boast of, but they're the best foundation Nature has bestowed upon one, and upon them I take my stand."

But even the spindles wavered as that creeping figure came by the high fence that separated the lane from the woodland, and—as the figure passed on—the men huddled up together in a heap, for the face they looked upon was as the face of a dead man, and the widely-opened eyes that the moon just then gleamed brightly on were as a dead man's eyes—unseeing, glassy, terrible in immobility.

The ghastly thing, in clinging waggoner's frock, with unkempt red locks coming low on the brow and crowned by a low wide-brimmed hat, had vanished—died out of sight among a group of clustering trees, and a faint moaning sound as of a thing in mortal pain was borne upon the wind to awe-struck ears.

"What did I tell yo'?" gasped Jeremy, who stood grasping his hair with his hands while his hat lay in the rut; "didna I tell yo' it wur bent under a burden? Did yo' see t' hands gropin' at summat as bowed its back, and workin' like Bill's when he's took wi' the fits? I wish I wur whoam."

Maybe they all did.

"Why wherever's Softie got to?" cried the farmer, glad, no doubt, of the thoroughly human sound of his own voice. Softie was seated in the ditch at the opposite side of the road crying bitterly, and wiping his eyes and nose on the sleeve of his jacket.

It was no easy job either to drag him from his lair, since

as soon as he was set upon his feet he flung himself down again; but, upon the farmer suggesting that they should all go home and leave him to interview the ghost alone, he took a more practical view of matters, and was led the rest of the way home by the chief constable, as if he were a prisoner newly captured by that mighty arm of the law.

The men were very silent as they went their way. The memory of that ghastly face, those fixed and sightless eyes, was a thing that clung to the mind like a burr. It was a thing that could not be shaken off even by the bravest.

They got Softie home; and it is to be feared his better-half cruelly misconstrued his trembling and prostrate condition; but as she flung-to the door in Farmer Dale's face, and refused to hear a word of explanation, everyone was powerless, and the last thing his companions heard of Softie was the fresh outburst of weeping with which he began to narrate what his wife was pleased to term a "pack o' danged lies."

Jeremy had been left at the lodge-gates.

There remained therefore only the farmer (whose solitary walk home did not appear to cause him much apprehension), Matthew, and Jake the cobbler.

"I reckon I've hit the right nail on the head," said the farmer gravely, before he bade the other two good-night; "yon's the man as robbed t' bank—donnot yo' mind how they said as he'd carroty locks an' a carter's smock—eh? He's dead and buried, be he who he may, but t' weary load o' sin upon his soul wunna let him rest."

Here the speaker paused a moment, overcome by the strange and awful experiences of that Sabbath night.

Then he added, reverently, pityingly, fervently:

"God deliver us from all such!"

And they knew that he meant from the sin, and not from the poor troubled spirit of the sinner.

"I reckon yo're about reet, farmer," said Jake after a moment's deep reflection. "I reckon yon's him, as yo' say. But what dangs me is this: why should he tak' to wanderin' round by Squire Dale's place, of a' places on the wide earth?"

CHAPTER XIV.

FAR ABOVE RUBIES.

"TURTLE assures me that my wife is better?"

"I think she is better—in the sense of being in less suffering."

The first speaker was Squire Stirling, of Dale End; the second, the Rev. Cuthbert Deane, Vicar of St. Mary's-in-the-Fields.

Both men had the habit of carrying their hands folded behind their backs as they walked. So far, then, resemblance between the two pacing up and down the long terrace held good. But no further.

Cuthbert Deane, who was upright as a dart, held his head rather thrown back than bowed. His eyes, steady, out-looking, grave, yet full of the sweet, clear light of content, seemed to watch life placidly, thankful for the part in it that God had called upon him to fill.

Geoffrey Stirling, since last we saw him, appeared to have lost several inches of height, since his chest had hollowed, and he had acquired an habitual stoop of the shoulders, whose slight gauntness had grown to attenuation.

His eyes, always deep-set beneath prominent eye-brows, were now abnormally sunken, while their orbits were lead-coloured, like those of one who never knows a sleep that is restful and dreamless. A strange restlessness possessed him, a fevered longing to be plunged into this interest or that. He was more voluble than of yore, making use of the same graceful gestures as aids to words, yet with an intensified fire in eyes and voice: and, when deeply moved, subject to a sudden twitching of the firm-set lips that told a tale of highly-strung nerves, and called forth many shakings of the head, and necessitated many pinches of snuff on the part of Dr. Turtle.

Not in a week, or a month, or a year, had these changes come upon Geoffrey Stirling. Their approach and development had been a gradual process, spread over a span of years; a process noticed least by those most constantly near him, but striking those who only saw him at intervals

vividly, and causing such to remark that it was a marvel so lucky a man—a man at whose feet Fortune had emptied her goodliest gifts—should age so rapidly, and carry his sixty years with so poor a grace.

Yet those who saw him in the company of others hardly realised how changed he was. Least of all could those who saw him in the society of his son Ralph judge of this. It almost seemed as though a reflected light of youth, and hope, and brightness shone upon him, radiating from that other, as you may see a barren and hoary hill rosy and beautiful with the exquisite tender glow of an early summer morning. He would watch the stripling, lithe, supple, bright-eyed, full of youthful witchery and manly boldness, listen to him, laugh at him and with him, in such fashion that the eyes of Cuthbert Deane and Alice his wife had been known to moisten with unshed tears at the sight, reading some hidden tragedy in so much love, yet lacking the key whereby to read it aright.

There were such curious features about the whole thing, said Alice, knitting her delicate brows and looking wise over it; for, if you loved anything very dearly, wasn't it natural to try and keep it by your side?

"Suppose," said this gentle student of humanity—not without some accession of colour, and a quickly suppressed sigh—"that you and I, husband, had a son like Ralph; do you think we should ever be able to bear him out of our sight?"

"At that rate, my dear," replied the vicar, "I fear we should make a sad molly-coddle of him."

He knew (who better?) that in the heart of the happiest of wives was an empty corner which God had not seen fit to fill, and so he spoke, half-jestingly, making believe to be blind to the secret yearning in his darling's heart.

"But, Cuthbert," she persisted, standing behind his chair with one hand upon his broad shoulder, and the other touching the short crisp curls on his temples lovingly, "it does seem strange, doesn't it? the passionate longing Mr. Stirling shows for Ralph's return, and then—when he has got him—the restless craving to have him gone again."

Alicia was not the only one in Becklington who puzzled over these anomalies of feeling on the part of the squire;

but neither she nor anyone else came to any satisfactory conclusion in the matter.

The world in general was content with a general assertion that it was "hard on the lad's mother": not so the vicar's wife. She knew Mrs. Geoffrey better; she could fathom a shallow as well as a deep nature. She recognised the fact that if his wife had fretted over Ralph's long absences—if the mother-hunger had preyed upon her heart—dimming her eyes and paling her cheek—Geoffrey Stirling would have kept the lad more at home.

The peculiar bent taken by any nature generally increases with age, as the tree that grows awry, grows more and more crooked with each summer's growth.

Mrs. Geoffrey had set up early in life as two things, a beauty and a chronic sufferer. In the first capacity she resented the fact that Ralph's young head towered far above her own; in the second his high spirits and youthful zest made him trying to her.

"I'm sure, Prettyman," she would say pettishly, "no one would ever take Master Ralph to be my son."

"Well, I don't know as they rightly would," that dame would answer, with a deeper meaning in her words than her mistress guessed; upon which Mrs. Geoffrey would smile at the pale, pretty image in her mirror, and recall the days when Ralph, attired in velvet and lace, formed an adjunct, not a flaw, in the family picture.

Ralph was a manly fellow, though sometimes apt to be moodish and dreamy; passionately fond of riding, of nature, and of the books he liked—rather ready to neglect those he didn't—and with such a love of music implanted in his very soul, that it was like a religion to him.

Naturally he got tired at times of hearing the same stories over and over again as he lounged in his mother's boudoir—the story of the cavalier who vowed he would give, oh! all sorts of fine things to kiss her hand—the hand that had been looked upon as a "model": the story of the artist who had seen her seated at her harp, and humbly asked permission to paint her as Erin—with her back hair down.

"But you never play the harp now, mother," the lad said one day, *à propos* of this touching reminiscence; "I wish

you did! It always stands there tied up in that holland thing like a child in its pinafore—and in the corner—for being naughty."

"My dear," said Mrs. Geoffrey, closing her eyes with languid grace—"you forget. I am not equal to such exertion nowadays; and, Ralph"—here a slight cough became tiresome—"how often am I to ask you to address me in a less vulgar, homely way? Such terms are all very well for the lower classes"—here the cough came again to the fore, and it must be chronicled that Ralph, cramming his hands into the depths of his pockets, went out of the room whistling; a greater enormity, if possible, in the eyes of Mrs. Geoffrey, than the use of the word "mother."

It was not probable that a woman of such flimsy calibre as this would fret much after anything, save the loss of her own beauty, or a lack of what she considered her due in the way of pity and sympathy in her various ailments; not even after her only child.

On the two former subjects she had not much to complain of; for time dealt very tenderly with her—so did her husband, so did Nurse Prettyman, so did the vicar's wife and the vicar himself. That fragile loveliness of hers had been all her life long a passport to the tenderness of the world around her. Who could be harsh to a thing so fair, and with so little of earth about it—as far as looks went?

Her hand, small as a child's, with soft transparent fingers and pink palm, was in itself a plea for consideration; the helpless appealing blue eyes (appealing to every one alike, for what no one quite knew) seemed to beg your kind offices, and disarm your criticism.

Mrs. Geoffrey was going to keep her beauty to the last.

And the last was not far off now.

For as her husband and Cuthbert Deane paced to and fro along the terrace-walk where she had trailed her pretty silks, and ambled graciously, her face shaded with dainty laces and flowers at her breast, the clock ticking on the high carved mantelshelf of her room seemed to mock her with the haste it made, and she clasped Alicia's hand as if she would never let it go.

Alicia had helped her in so many troubles; she would surely help her now!

This terrible stabbing pain in her chest, as if every breath she drew were a knife seeking her heart, would pass. Dr. Turtle had come and brought her some new drug to quiet her pain. She was better already, and would soon fall asleep (but never let go Alicia's hand), and then wake almost well again.

"She must be longing to see Ralph," thought the vicar's wife, grave, sweet, helpful, holding that fragile hand in hers, and watching the face where burnt two fever-spots, hot and bright as rose-petals in the sun.

"Is there anything you want, dear?" she said, noting a little restless movement, and hoping that her mother's heart was astir.

"Yes"—the word came with a sob like that of a grieving child—"yes—to get well——"

Poor soul! she had never meant to get ill in earnest.

It had been charming, that being never quite strong, that taking her place in the first and foremost rank with everybody, because she "needed so much care." It had been a pleasant pastime to compare notes with other sickly women, and think how much daintier were her invalid robes than theirs; how much more commonplace their symptoms; how lacking in elegance their doctors compared to Dr. Turtle.

All this had been delightful, and, since Geoffrey's accession to fortune, had she not played the rôle in a wider sphere, and before a more distinguished audience?

Great ladies had made a pet of Mrs. Geoffrey; wished to experiment upon her case with their favourite nostrums; pitied her for belonging to that interesting army of martyrs, people who are "never well." (A kind of martyr that the outer world is, as a rule, much more ready to sympathise with, than the members of the martyr's own household.)

Yes; she had been very happy at Dale End; a great deal too happy to remember, when the vicar brought home his bride to the vicarage, that there must be a certain trial to that patient woman in seeing strangers in her old home, and visiting that home under strange and new conditions.

It was Geoffrey Stirling who thought of that; Geoffrey

Stirling who treated Alicia when she came to Dale End with a chivalrous deference—a tender sympathetic reverence, as though she were the chatelaine of the old manor, and he but a sojourner and stranger within its gates at her sweet will.

The sight of the old home had been bitter to her just that once, for she fancied she saw the old "dad" bustling about the dear, familiar rooms; she heard those ghosts of sounds never to be heard on earth again, that most of us are fated to listen to at one time or other in our lives—the ghost of a foot-fall—of a voice—of an uttered name.

Then her great love for her husband—the never-fading sunshine that his love for her made about her pathway and in her passionate heart—triumphed over all else. She visited Dale End without sadness, and, though always loving it "for the old sake's sake," set it a little lower than that home of her own, where, even in the darkest, dreariest days, was sunshine within that knew no waning.

Alicia had grown fond of Mrs. Geoffrey, in the same way as she might have grown fond of a pretty child, and—which was the stranger of the two—Mrs. Geoffrey had grown fond of Alicia; had grown to rely upon her, to look up to her—sometimes to be guided by her.

As has been already said, the poor lady never meant to be really ill—that is, not unromantically, disagreeably so.

But, unfortunately, people who constantly play at being a thing sometimes end in unpremeditated reality.

Constant dwelling upon self, lack of healthy exercise, having recourse to stimulating narcotics as antidotes to hysteria, all these things predispose to serious illness, and, a violent cold having settled upon Mrs. Geoffrey's lungs, the enfeebled system could make no effort to fight against the malady.

For the first time in her life she found herself confronted by a foe with whom appealing looks availed her less than nothing. Her bewilderment and dismay were touching to see. Geoffrey had anticipated her every wish—always. Why could he do nothing now? Dr. Turtle had met every one of her symptoms all these years most skilfully—she had told Lady Boscawen so only a week ago—and now, why did he let her go on suffering like this? Please to fetch Alicia

at once; never let Alicia leave her again, even for a moment. The wish was nearer its realization than she who uttered it imagined.

For the end was not far off now, and Alicia was still by her side, holding up her little burning hand, moistening the parched and parted lips.

Meanwhile, out on the long terrace, the two men were pacing slowly up and down in the beautiful dying light of the autumn day. Winter was near at hand. From russet, and gold, and red, the leaves had turned to brown—shrivelled, died, dropped. Yet robin sang on a naked bough no lest sweetly than when he piped from a bower of leaves; and a flood of glorious ruddy light made even the bare trees beautiful, while, as to the old cedar on the lawn, it looked like a fairy-tree; as indeed to the vicar it always did, even when it was dripping with rain, or peering forth, all blurred and indistinct, from under a shroud of fog.

"What an evening for the time of year!" said Geoffrey Stirling, standing a moment to look at the sun-bathed landscape at their feet; "the air is as warm as though it were May instead of close on November." Then he turned sharply on his companion.

"Then you think she's better?"

"I said—easier," replied the vicar.

He was a man who could not drape the truth to give it a fair semblance; and yet his bluntness of speech hurt less than another's kindly prevarication.

"Well, easier; that is something. She is one who cannot bear pain."

"She is a person one would fain spare all possible pain, certainly; and I think Alicia is a good hand at that."

"At what is she not a good hand? Cuthbert Deane, I tell you what it is, that wife of yours is a pearl among women."

"A jewel of great price."

"It is hard to set a value on such women; they are the salt of life."

"The Psalmist puts it best, Geoffrey—'far above rubies.'"

"Why she has never left my poor girl since the day she was taken ill!"

"She never will leave her—while there is need to stay."

Squire Stirling cast a startled glance at the speaker. His eyes seemed to flash and scintillate in their deep orbits.

"You don't mean—ah, yes, I see, of course—you mean until she is about again."

"No, I do not."

"You don't mean—you don't think my poor girl is going to die? Why, it seems a cruel thing even to say the words! It is like speaking of a child, a bird—any unthinking creature that loves the sunshine and the pleasant things of life—passing away into darkness."

He shuddered, drawing his shoulders together, but still paced on.

When he spoke next it was almost as if he were speaking to himself, as if he had forgotten that he was not alone.

"Death is very awful when it comes home to one, knocks at one's own gates, not one's neighbour's. I don't think I am a coward (if I had been a coward I could not have lived). No, no, not that; but it is awful to think of her—poor, pretty Lucy!"

"Still, we cannot always keep even those we love best; and surely to the Christian death ought not to be as the door that leads into darkness. I remember even when that poor fellow Gabriel Devenant ——. What is it?"

The vicar might well ask.

Squire Stirling had started violently, and turned his face towards the house.

"You thought you heard some one call? Shall I go and see? You must have fancied something, you have grown so pale. Sit down on the seat under the larch, and I will go and see."

"No, no, there is no need. It was a fancy—only a fancy; my nerves are shaken with the long disquiet. What you have said, too, has been a shock to me. I did not understand from Turtle's manner that he thought unfavourably of Lucy.

"Turtle's manner is unfortunate; he is too polished to be candid; and at such times as this candour is helpful."

"Yes," answered the other, tossing back the grizzled locks from his brow; "yes, candour is best; but Turtle means well—he means well."

Both the men were bare-headed, the warmth of the

evening being so exceptional, and they had strolled out not meaning to stay.

Now, as the clear light fell on Geoffrey Stirling's face, the Vicar noticed, as though it were some new thing brought to his notice, the hollowness of the lines about the brow; the tracery of blue veins just above the temples from which the hair had been but just put back; the strange wax-like transparence of the sensitive nostrils; the cavernous sunken eyes.

"How worn he is—how worn!" he thought pityingly; "and this sorrow so near at hand. How will he bear it?"

"I have been afraid," said Mr. Stirling, after a silence broken only by the beat of their measured footsteps, "that she should ask——"

Here he hesitated a moment.

The vicar finished the sentence:

"For Ralph?"

"Yes; and I have asked myself what I should do? Because, you see, Ralph is out of reach."

"You hardly know exactly where he is yourself, do you?"

"Well, no, not to a mile or so" (this with a smile, as he fumbled in the breast pocket of his coat). "His tutor's last letter was from—let me see—here it is; yes, from Buffalo, a primitive sort of place, not far from Niagara. 'The country about here is most interesting; Ralph is delighted with everything, and particularly with sleigh driving. He says I am not to say a word about the Falls, because he is going to write a poem on them.' Ha! ha! fancy that, you see they're all right. Nothing can be more satisfactory; and they expect to be home by Christmas. They will be starting soon. What is the name of the ship? Let me see—here it is—the *Aladdin*, from New York to Liverpool. Bless the lad! it will be——"

Suddenly he faltered in his speech, and laid a heavy hand on Cuthbert's arm.

"I was going to say like sunshine in the old place to see him; but—no—no; if he comes to a sorrowing home, there'll be no sunshine for me or for him."

"Geoffrey," said the Vicar, speaking with the air of a

man who has made up his mind to say a thing, and intends to say it; "you and I are very old friends. We might say things to each other that in other people would seem, well—impertinences, and I should like to say this to you now; I really think you are hard upon your wife, and upon yourself too, in having that boy so much away from home."

"You do, do you?" said Geoffrey, with one of those sharp changes of manner and voice that were characteristic of him.

"Yes," replied Cuthbert, watching the half-closed gleaming eyes of his companion, and marvelling at such deep disturbance for so slight a thing; "and so does Alicia."

"It is very kind of you and of Alicia to put yourselves to so much trouble about my affairs. I ought to be deeply grateful to you both; let us hope—for the sake of human nature—that I am."

He laughed, hugging himself, as one who rejoiced in the flavour of a secret jest, cracked with himself alone:

"Let us hope I am—let us hope I am."

"I have sometimes wondered too——" began the unperturbed vicar.

"Oh, you have wondered too, as well as thought, have you?" put in Geoffrey, still watching his companion keenly out of narrowed lids.

"Yes, I have wondered—we have wondered—that since you evidently (and rightly too, to a reasonable extent, there can be no doubt of that) think travelling good for a young man, you have not sent Ralph (always with his excellent tutor of course) to Barbadoes—let him see into the working of the estates there—learn something of business."

"Ta! ta! ta!" said Geoffrey, acompanying the exclamation with impatient snapping of his fingers; "what webs of suggestions you and the good wife have been weaving. Barbadoes indeed! What next? Do you think it would refine and educate Master Ralph to let him see my overseer have the niggers whipped? Would you have the boy spend his time among the cane-tracts—eh? No, no; he'll have to give his mind to it all one of these days; but not yet—not yet. Meanwhile I have an excellent agent out there, and things thrive with me, Cuthbert. I'm a richer

man every year—I add land to land, and field to field. Ralph shall be the largest landowner in the country yet; do you hear that, my friend? Everything I touch turns to gold. No other plantations yield what mine do; and here at home in England if I take shares in a concern it doubles its capital within the year. I bear a charmed life, I tell you, a charmed life; fate itself can't fight against me! As to Ralph, let him be; he's best as he is. I hate a man who is full of narrow-minded, insular prejudices. Ralph will never be that. I hate a man who hasn't seen the world. Ralph will never be that. Stay till you see him again; stay till he comes home to keep Christmas with us. You were away last time he was at home—away for one of your 'parson's holidays'—you didn't see him. Ah, Cuthbert, he's a sight to make an old man young, is that bright boy of mine!"

The light, the glory, the passion of love that lit up his face into an almost unearthly beauty, blotting out all the haggard lines, softening the sinister set of the lips, made the vicar marvel not a little; but even as he marvelled, all thought of Geoffrey was swept from his mind, save as of one needing instant help and sustaining, for he heard the voice of Alicia his wife calling on her husband's name, and by that voice's sound he knew that Azrael, Angel of Death, had touched a human heart and stilled its beating for ever.

"What is it? what is it?" said Geoffrey, white, trembling, changed as the winter landscape changes when a cloud obscures the sun. He spoke in a dull whisper, clinging to Cuthbert's arm, "Lucy has been so happy since we came to Dale End—like a child with a new toy—it cannot be that she is—dead?"

"Come"—said the vicar, and led him in, to where Alicia stood with outstretched hands and tender pitying eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE TOILS.

EVERY bough and spray of the trees in the White House garden glittered with a new and lovely foliage—a gift of passing beauty bestowed by winter's hand—born in a night, and liable to perish with the first breath of thaw. Shining crystals gemmed the grass, and each gable of the old house was outlined by an exquisite garniture of frost.

"We are going to have a cold Christmas," said folks to one another, and boys grinned at the happy prospect of slides to be made for other people to fall down upon.

But the river that ran, swollen and turgid, at the bottom of the White House garden would give no one the chance of gliding serenely over a frozen surface—not it!

A very low degree below freezing-point was needed to stay that river in its course, and silence its rush and swirl; and, even when winter did succeed in making a captive of it, were there not always pot-holes that meant treachery, lying in wait for the unwary, and a deep place here and there under over-hanging boughs that Becklington mothers shuddered to think of?

To-day it ran black and deep, swollen from the autumn rains; and in the perfect stillness that ever broods over a frost-bound world, its resonant murmur seemed to come close to the ear like the echo of the sea in a shell.

A faint, ruddy light came from behind a pile of fleecy clouds in the west, glowed through the high oriel window of the White House library, touched the dancing bobbins on Hester Devenant's lace-pillow and turned them ruddy, making the finger-tips that moved them so deftly to and fro, over and under, across and back again, rosy too.

When the Becklington public had thought it the right and probable thing that Gabriel Devenant's widow should turn her skill in lace-making to good profit, she had disappointed expectation by never being seen with a bobbin in her hand.

Now that she had been "made a lady of" by some occult and mysterious means known to none—now that

she had servants to do her will and a fine house above her head, she had all at once developed a strange love for cushions and dancing bobbins.

Did this fancy on her part arise from a certain hatred of idleness born of her early life of activity? Was thought wont to be so active in her busy brain that active fingers kept welcome pace with it, even while they left it free? Be that as it may, yards of lace fine as cobwebs, delicate as the meshes of a dragon-fly's wing, came from that busy loom, while the grave face that bent above the active fingers might have been Penelope's watching the progress of a shroud.

Hester made no single error in the intricate pattern pinned on the blue silk pillow on her lap, and yet her grave eyes lost no passing look that crossed the face of the man who sat opposite to her.

We say man advisedly, for, though elderly people in the town still sometimes spoke of him as "the boy Davie," David Robin was now in the seven-and-twentieth year of his age, and, though still something of a "weakling," not one whom any person of ordinary penetration could judge to be lacking in the truest manliness, *i.e.*, in moral courage and power of character.

It was still possible that many might say, as they had said of yore, that "summat ailed Davie, though yo' could na ca' him a crookback."

A stoop in the broad shoulders, a peculiar way of carrying the head, a certain pathetic expression in the pale blue eyes, a lanky length in the thin, nervous hands, marked Davie as something different to his fellows; but there was nothing effeminate in the face itself, and much that was winning and tender, though the mouth and chin were hidden by a soft fair growth of beard, veiling the smile that came but seldom, and was more felt than seen.

"How distinctly you hear the river such a day as this!" said Mrs. Devenant, "it is as if everything else went far away and only that came near."

"Yes," said Davie; "the falls just above are full after the rains."

But he spoke as though he were listening intently

for some other sound than that of the falls; and his eyes, those messengers of the soul, turned wistfully towards the door.

"Hilda is gone to the vicarage," said Mrs. Devenant quietly; "she will not be back till late, and then Mr. Deane will bring her home."

Hester spoke with the strange gentleness which she gave to Davie and to none else; the gentleness that, as a boy, he had counted as a thing infinitely precious, and that now, as a man, he held even dearer still.

For he thought that she read—had read—his heart; that she knew how beautiful a thing life was growing in his eyes, how the sound of a voice and the echo of a step made such music for his ears as seemed more the melody of heaven than of earth; and how both smile and step were her daughter Hilda's.

It must be surely that she read his neart aright, since she could read his thoughts so well!

Had she not answered one but now? Had he not been longing for that closed door to open, and let his fair young love pass in, and had not Mrs. Devenant, kindly cruel, told him that she was gone?

For that day at least the White House was doomed to be for Davie a casket without its jewel, a cage without its sleek plumaged bird of song.

He strangled a little sigh in its birth.

With so gracious a hostess surely it were ungracious for a guest to be glum.

But soon Davie had no temptation to gloom; soon his eyes were shining with an eager interest, his hands pressed one in the other as he talked.

For they spoke of Mr. Geoffrey.

To the rest of the world he might be Squire Stirling—Mr. Stirling of Dale End—what the world would. To Davie he was always Mr. Geoffrey. Only one other name for him existed in Davie's vocabulary of love, and that was "Master."

"I keep hoping things may be better now"—he said nervously, warming his hands at the blaze.

"Now Mrs. Geoffrey is dead?" put in his companion, and tap-tap went the bobbins on their silken bed.

"Oh no, no. I did not mean that," said David breathlessly. "What I do mean is this: there are some natures that can bear any kind of suffering better than suspense—waiting for a thing is worse than facing it. Well, I think it is so with my master, and that the fear, the watching, the anxiety, of his wife's last illness told upon him terribly. Mrs. Devenant, in all that I have thought and felt about him from the time I was a boy you have been the one, of all the world, to show me most sympathy. You know all that is in my heart about him, do you not? You know how all my life long I have thought and dreamt of him as he came into his uncle's room, bearing me on his shoulder, laughing, taking me under the shelter of his care from that hour. Without him I might have been cast out into the world like a mere straw upon a flood, to have drifted I know not whither. 'Never forget, lad,' said Mother Susan when she was dying, 'never forget that Maister Geoffrey kept you in the bank, whether or no, and saved me and Dickory from breaking our hearts after our boy.' And I never do forget, though I hardly think Mr. Geoffrey knows how well I remember. Once, I had been telling Master Ralph the story (he was a little fellow then, and loved to hear a tale told in the twilight)—well—when he and I went into Mr. Geoffrey's room a little later, he ran up to his father, and 'Dad,' says he, 'I'm glad you didn't let them send Davie to the poor-house.' Mr. Geoffrey looked up from his book, puzzled-like for a moment, and then his face grew all bright—you know how it glows like sunshine when he smiles?—and he held out his hand to me, and 'Davie,' he said, 'I think I did myself a good turn that time, as well as you; what do you think about it—eh?' It made me so happy, Mrs. Devenant, to hear him speak like that; my heart grew so full as I listened standing there with my hand in his, that I could find no words to answer him—not one. It is a long time ago now—a long, long time—but I shall never forget it: how the child climbed upon his father's knee, and put his arms about his neck, and how Mr. Geoffrey held out his hand for mine. I seemed to be drawn so near to the two of them—who were themselves so close together—that I could never get far from them any more. When all that terrible trouble came, it seemed as though I were struck

through them—the father and the son—always together in my mind ; always, as it were, two in one."

"And yet," said Mrs. Devenant, "they are often separated now ; young Ralph is oftener away than at home."

"Yes," said Davie, his delicately traced brows knitting in a sort of hazy trouble ; "I know ; and I often fear the master is lonely without what makes the whole place seem full of light and happy sounds when it is there. There are people like that, you know—people who make you feel as if all the world is light and warm, just because they are in it, and you are near them."

Mrs. Devenant looked up a moment, then down again with a faint smile softening her mouth.

Was not he in truth laying his heart bare? Did she not know that he was thinking of Hilda as he talked? Did she not hold in her hand the magnet that should draw him to the White House when she would, and—(as love that has hope to live upon never stands still, but must ever be taking a step forward)—would not the power of the magnet grow until all other influences, however potent, should pale beside—Hilda's?

"If this is so," said Hester, passing unnoticed the concluding rhapsody of Davie's last speech, "if Mr. Geoffrey misses the bright presence of his son so much, is it not strange that he sends the boy roaming all over the world?'

"Yes ; I have often thought so."

"What do you think is his reason for so much self-sacrifice?"

"I cannot tell."

Tap, tap, went the bobbins on their silken bed, having all the talk to themselves for awhile, since the other two kept silence.

Davie, leaning his head upon his hand, watched the wood embers fall and glow, in the old fashion of the old days when Mother Susan used to look upon him with awe, thinking he was "wi' Dickory."

And, though the bobbins never ceased their soft low clatter, Hester Devenant watched him keenly for a moment or two.

Then she broke new ground :

"How glad you were when Mr. Geoffrey made old

Anthony his steward! Such a letter as you wrote me, Davie; and yet I could not help fancying you felt as if you were forgotten—left out in the cold—still doomed to add up the corn-merchant's books, with your heart up at Dale End, with master and agent."

"Perhaps I did; but I was sure Mr. Geoffrey would think of me in the end, and I was right, you see; and then, Mrs. Devenant, I got the best of it—didn't I?"

Davie smiled in his beard at the thought of having got the better of old Anthony, and, the smile climbing to his eyes, made them very sweet and bright, and no more dreamy and wistful, as when he had been looking at the fire.

"You mean that you live with Mr. Geoffrey?" said Hester pushing the curtain near which she sat further back, for the day was waning fast, and lace-making requires light.

"Yes; Anthony has quite a fine house, and dear old Mrs. Geddes walks 'in silk attire'; but I—I am near my master always."

"You make an excellent secretary, Davie, I doubt not—neat-handed as you are, and with such a head for figures."

"I try to be more than that to Mr. Geoffrey. I try to make up to him for the loss of Master Ralph when he is away. I watch and wait, and seize upon any little thing that comes in my way, and seems a possible thing to do for him. It makes me very happy if he seems to find any comfort in me."

"But you speak of Mr. Geoffrey as if he were one who stands in need of comfort—who is preyed upon by some secret sorrow that bears him to the ground; not as if he were—as everyone says he is—the luckiest man in all the country side."

"Do I?" said Davie. "Have I spoken of him like that, or is it you who read the thoughts of my heart like an open book?"

"Then you have thought it might be so? You have fancied some secret grief weighs upon his heart and conscience?"

"His heart, yes; his conscience, no. Nothing can weigh on the conscience save sin, and which of us can show

cleaner hands—a lovelier life? Which of us can lay claim to have garnered up so much love, so much reverence, from those around us, as my dear master, Geoffrey Stirling?"

The bobbins no longer tapped light heels and danced upon their silken bed. The cushion was set aside. It was "blind man's holiday" now, that pleasant hour between the lights when the most industrious deem it no crime to be idle. Mrs. Devenant sat still, with quiet hands folded, while the cat purred on the rug at her feet, and the shadows born of fire-light began to flicker on the dark oak panels and on the low ceiling; and all the goblins on the mantel-shelf (relations, it will be remembered, of Ralph's goblin on the stairs) stirred and gibed in the flicker of the flame.

So still was Mrs. Devenant, so still the room after Davie had done speaking, that the rush of the river almost seemed to have come close up under the window. Like a silhouette against the long breadth of faintly-lighted casement, Davie could see the beautifully-poised head and gracious profile of the woman who had chosen him out from among his fellows, to make him her trusted friend; but he could not see her face—so rapidly had the light faded—or he might have been startled at the strange and unwonted expression which it wore.

A look of pity—nay, more of compunction and bitter regret, and yet, overlying the rest like a veil, an unfaltering, implacable resolve. So might the inquisitor of old have looked upon a young and zealous adherent of a doomed creed, regretful that the torture was inevitable, yet never once wavering in the resolve to apply it.

"Davie, you are a warm lover; would you be as good a hater, I wonder?"

The words startled him, breaking abruptly as they did on the silence.

"I don't know," he said; "I never tried. It would be horrible really to hate any one—I mean so that you would gladly bring them to shame and sorrow, or see them suffer and not try to help them—since Christ died for all."

The last five words were spoken softly, almost under his breath, as if he was touching some thought so deep and holy that it must needs be handled timidly.

Mrs. Devenant pressed back the rippling hair from her

temples. She was conscious of a sense of oppression, of an air surrounding her in which she could not breathe freely.

"There is such a thing as wrong that cannot be forgiven," she said, rising into sudden passion, as her way was when much moved.

"By man—yes; by God—no," put in Davie in the same hushed voice in which he had before spoken.

"God judges sin as hardly as man."

"Yes; there are some sins He hates more than others, such as pride and revenge—sins that rear themselves up against Himself, as it were. But surely there is no sin beyond forgiveness since Chirst died——"

Here Davie paused, appalled at the result of his words.

"What have I said? Have I made you angry—dear Mrs. Devenant?"

He might well be aghast, for Hester, with sundry inarticulate sounds as of passionate anger ill-restrained, had started to her feet and was pacing the room from end to end, twisting and contorting in her restless hands the handkerchief which she had taken from her pocket, and for a moment pressed against her lips as if to stem the torrent of words that panted for egress.

Seeing that Davie was greatly perturbed, was in fact standing by the mantel-shelf the picture of mingled amaze and distress, she came to his side, laid her hand on his shoulder, and laughed.

Such a laugh that, instead of being reassured by it, Davie shrank back against the sculptured goblins almost as if he were clinging to them for protection.

He had heard of Hester Devenant's temper, but never, all through the long years of their friendship, had he seen a display of it until now.

The experience was painful, and Davie was an Israelite in whom there was no guile.

Hester's shrewd eyes read his face aright. Her influence had received a shock. Her power must be recovered, and that promptly.

"Davie, I am irritable and out of sorts to-day. Forgive me—dear. Above all, don't talk like a Methodist; it sets all my teeth on edge."

The grave questioning eyes seemed hard to meet, shining

as they did in the firelight, and holding a strange, awful something in their depths that reminded her of—yes, of the look in Gabriel's, her husband's, when first he stood face to face with the demon that possessed his wife.

But Davie was coming round—rapidly, too. Who can gauge the charm of that one word "dear," uttered by a woman so little given to caress or words of tenderness? Besides, was not Davie looking at and judging Hilda's mother? The recollection of that one fact brought palliation with it, and Hester's unwonted tenderness completed the spell.

She would not speak to him like that, thought Davie (knowing, as she must know, all his heart), unless, knowing she was ready to smile upon his hopes, if Hilda would.

Of that aspect of the matter Davie, as yet, dared not even trust himself to think. He was hardly reconciled to the fact of his own boldness in daring to love that stately maid, much less could he bring himself to dare to hope for a return of this venturesome love of his.

Time alone could tell how that would be—time, and loving service upon his part, humbly laid at his lady's feet.

Meanwhile, the utterance of that one little word "dear" seemed to Davie an omen of surpassing blessedness.

Hester had spoken it (or so he thought) just in the tone which a mother might use to a well-beloved son. Was he not in very truth that, in heart, to her, already? Why then should he be so prompt to judge her?

Thinking these thoughts he smiled, and Hester, quick to catch the happy change of mood, smiled back at him.

The gusty storm was over. Peace reigned once more. The two stood by the fire, in close company with the gibing goblins.

"So you and Mr. Geoffrey have Dale End all to yourselves?" said Hester presently. Apparently she had as much difficulty in dragging her thoughts away from Dale End as Davie oftentimes experienced in disentangling his from the White House and its inmates.

"Yes; but we shall not have it for long, Christmas is not far off now, and then Master Ralph will be home. It will be a sad home-coming enough for him, God knows, with his poor mother gone and his father looking so worn and ill.

But one can see how Mr. Geoffrey is looking forward to it for all that. He's in and out of the boy's room a dozen times a day, and, it's always 'we'll do this, Davie,' and 'we'll do that, Davie, when Ralph comes home.'"

"Your being away when Mrs. Geoffrey died was a pity; you might have been a great help and comfort."

"I don't know; there is little lack of help or comfort either when the vicar and his wife are about the place. Mrs. Geoffrey couldn't bear Mrs. Deane out of her sight, and the vicar was with my master pretty near night and day. Old Anthony used to be there a good deal, and he says he never saw such comfort given in time of trouble. I was the best help where I was, seeing to a lot of business for Mr. Geoffrey in London."

"You are growing quite a traveller."

"Yes, and I like it too, and Mr. Geoffrey says I manage the business well—quite to his satisfaction. I would travel thousands of miles to hear him say that at the end of it, and think nothing of the journey either. This time I had pleasant company coming home, for Amos Callender had been south, buying hides, and we travelled home together. He's a man worth listening to, with a gift of pithy speech that takes my fancy marvellously well. By the way, I saw him again a day or two ago—(Mr. Geoffrey is giving a prize for window-gardening, and Bess is proud of her show, so I went to see the sight)—and he was telling me of this foolish talk about a ghost having been seen up our way. I hope such gabble won't reach the master's ears, nor Hilda's either for matter of that. It might fright her to think of it, coming home from Mr. Deane's of an afternoon now the days are drawing in so."

"Who saw this—ghost?"

"Jeremy Bindwhistle first, and then three or four of them together—little Jake among the rest."

"Jake is a shrewd fellow."

"Yes, and so is Farmer Dale an honest one."

"You say true in that, Davie. He once offered to do me a good turn. I have not forgotten. He sings hymns with a lusty voice, I can tell you."

"It would be hard to beat Jake at that game," said Davie, laughing.

"But where did they see this ghostly thing?"

"In the Dale End shrubbery, where the woodland skirts the road."

"Whose ghost was it?"

"The ghost of the man who robbed the bank—so they say."

Hester's breath began to come in little gasps, and she clutched hold of the goblin mantel-shelf as if to steady herself.

"Why, I have frightened you with all this nonsense!" said Davie with concern.

"No, no," she said; "tell me more. Why did they say it was—that?"

"Because it wore a waggoner's frock, and had red locks hanging about its face: don't you remember, at that time there was some talk about a man in a——"

"Yes, yes, but why did they take it for a ghost? Surely, some poor fellow on the tramp——"

"They say it had the face of a dead man, with a dead man's eyes, wide—staring—blind——"

She sat down quickly in a low chair by the hearth, crouching over the fire, and leaning her forehead on her open palms.

He thought he read but too well the cause of her agitation. His own unthinking folly had brought it all about.

She was trembling from head to foot. Poor Davie could see her shadow vibrate on the wall.

He knelt beside her, pleading for himself.

"I ought not to have told you such things; I ought to have remembered how you have suffered in the past. Do forgive me before I go, for go I must—I have over-stayed my time as it is."

She lifted her face to his, and there he saw—not what he had thought to see, a tearful, pallid cheek and timid eye; but the glitter and fire of a fierce and cruel joy.

"There is nothing to forgive," she said, still all a-tremble, but not with fear; "I love to hear a ghost-story. When you hear more of this one, come and tell it me, and—Davie—Hilda shall listen too."

CHAPTER XVI.

DAVIE'S TASK.

We need to mark the rooms and their details well, for in them are some of the strangest scenes in our drama to be enacted, and it is always a good thing to grasp the idea of your scenery before the play begins. They were two, leading the one through the other, the inner chamber three shallow steps lower than that through which it was entered. They were called "the squire's rooms," and were held sacred to him, so that none ever ventured to set foot in them unsummoned, save Nurse Prettyman—now a white-haired, sonsie old woman of sixty—and David Robin, the squire's confidential secretary. The library—thus was the first room named—opened on to a passage which led off from the large entrance-hall at Dale End, and was shut off from the rest of the house by double doors. It had been a favourite room with poor old Sir Roland, and could its walls have been endowed with speech they might have told many a sorry tale of hot disputes between father and son, and of tearful Alicia stealing down from her own chamber after the ne'er-do-weel son and brother had departed, to try and comfort the poor old dad.

On either side the wide low fireplace, with its brass dogs and tiled hearth, book-shelves ran from floor to ceiling. A mullioned window, so deeply set out in the venerable masonry that the outside sill might have formed a comfortable couch for a wayfarer, occupied the centre of one side of the room. It was framed in ivy, whose stems were in places as thick as a man's wrist, having grown great with the passing of time.

Here birds loved to build, and Geoffrey Stirling was very jealous over those winged friends of his, resenting the slightest interference with their domestic arrangements. This fact they were not slow to discover, one bright-eyed thrush hatching her young brood within a hand's breadth of the window-frame, and bringing them all out upon the broad sill at last, with the evident intention of giving the master of the place an opportunity of admiring them. Even

Gaylad understood that the birds must not be barked at or interfered with, and would let an impudent speckled-breasted mavis go a worm-hunting almost under his nose, scarcely heeding it so much as to give one swish of his feathered tail. When Stirling's Bank was done away with, Gaylad had been relegated to the White House, his badly fulfilled duties as watch-dog being at an end: but that was in the days of his youth. Now age had told upon him, and so long as he could lie basking in the sun or on the rug before the fire, and be quite sure that his master was not far off, Gaylad had no higher ambitions.

It will be remembered that Sir Roland Ashby, in the heat of his righteous anger, had expressed a wish to have Gaylad shot, as a sentry who had slept on duty. But Geoffrey Stirling's attachment to the dog resulted in a more lenient view of his short-comings, and, as Davie loved what his master loved, and Nurse Prettyman would have looked upon it as a direct flying in the face of Providence to differ from the squire in any single point of preference or otherwise, Gaylad had a comfortable berth of it now-a-days.

In a small recess at the end of the Dale End library was a window opening to the ground. From this, stone steps ran down to the garden, and here stretched in the sun, was the place to find Gaylad in summer, while in winter he might be looked for on the shaggy rug before the fire.

Ralph and he were great friends, and Davie and he were great friends, while he so far favoured and patronized the agent, Anthony Geddes, that he would escort that potentate as far as half-way down the avenue of black and venerable yews that led to the great gates, and there take leave of him with much grace.

But Gaylad lived for his master; and when Geoffrey was away from home (which was not seldom, since he had business chambers in London, and was a keen and successful speculator) the poor old dog would mope and pine, so that, as Nurse Prettyman said, "it fair made a body's heart ache to see t' looks on him"; while the faintest and most distant sound of his master's step or voice instantly galvanised him into such life and energy as his years permitted.

At night the dog slept inside the door of Davie's room, a chamber situated high in what was called the old tower,

which commanded a view of exceeding beauty, and was of a size to serve the secretary as both bedroom and writing-room. This habit on the part of Gaylad was supposed to be a lingering recollection of his duties at the bank; for he always marched up the stairs with the air of a martyr, and sank to repose with a sigh of resignation, turning his eyes up to Davie with a look that seemed to say, "Being a dog of a well-regulated mind I do my duty—but I don't like it."

No one could well blame poor old Gaylad for preferring the library at Dale End to any other room in the house; since there cosiness seemed to sit enshrined as the presiding goddess of the place.

It was a place to be at rest in—a place that looked as though it might be consecrated to quiet and happy thoughts; for it was shielded from the glare of day by the shadow of a mighty yew, whose lowermost branches swept the velvet sward outside.

The walls were panelled in dark wood, and over the mantelshelf a tall narrow mirror let into the panelling, with two lesser mirrors, one on either side, produced an effect somewhat similar to that of a chancel window with three lights.

Crimson was the prevailing tint of the room: soft-hued, subdued by delicate cream-coloured draperies. Heavy rugs made of skins of beasts lay here and there upon the polished floor, and the squire's desk, with endless nests of endless drawers on either hand, stood just beneath the mullioned window.

There were not many pictures in the room, but those there were, were priceless gems.

A Magdalene at the foot of the Cross, full of passionate penitence; a girl's head, by Greuze, ripe and luscious as a sun-warmed peach: some indications of a slouched hat and dingy plume overhanging a pair of living eyes that no hand save Rembrandt's could have made at once so sombre and so bright; and a very old painting called "The Dying Miser"—a strange picture and one that, catching the fancy, held it. The moribund lay extended on his tossed and tumbled couch in the last agonies of death, yet fully conscious. His face, skull-like in its emaciation, was turned with fiendish

vindictive look upon a figure seen in the background, a swarthy and beautiful woman, his leman in life, his torturer in death. Her lithe and supple hands toyed with and bathed in a sea of golden pieces, while a mocking smile parted her red lips, showing the gleam of the pearly teeth within. Her evil eyes defied the dying tyrant, now delivered into her hands. In vain one skinny hand clutched the air—in vain the wasted mouth mowed and gibed; she had stolen the key of the coffer—she toyed with the hoarded gold.

Underneath this picture was written:

"We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out."

Many thought both the picture and the spirit which it breathed incongruous in that pleasantest of rooms; but as Geoffrey Stirling was master, and chose to have it there, there it hung over against the window, so that the light fell upon it, while on a sunny day the shadows of the ivy-leaves flickered around and about it, an intangible and softly fluttering garland.

So much for the outer room; the inner one—which, it will be remembered, was entered down three shallow steps—was furnished as a sleeping-room—though it had not originally been intended for such, as might indeed be seen by the branching sconces in bronze on the walls, and the richly-stained glass windows that faced the bed. A brass-bound sarcophagus-like coffer, old and valuable, no doubt, in the eyes of cognoscenti, stood between these windows. It might have stepped out of that weird picture, The Dying Miser; it might have been the very one violated by the dark-eyed courtezan in sight of its agonised owner.

Not even David, the confidential secretary, had ever seen that coffer open. As to the domestic household at Dale End, those who knew of it spoke of it as containing "untold treasure," though of what nature no man ventured to surmise.

When Mrs. Geoffrey's increased ill-health rendered it necessary that Nurse Prettyman should be at hand night and day to attend upon her, the squire had given up the room in the upper corridor, next his wife's, and settled down in this lower chamber, giving little or no trouble to anyone so long as his will was not crossed, and living more and more in the world of his own thoughts and the manage-

ment of his vast wealth—for, though in the early days of his prosperity people had exaggerated Geoffrey Stirling's riches, multiplying his possessions so as to make a welcome wonder of them, it would have been hard indeed to have rated them too highly nowadays.

Like a river that has overflowed its banks, the Dale End estate had passed its old limits by many a broad acre, and, had Sir Roland risen from his grave to visit his old home, its present boundaries would have made him open his ghostly eyes.

Truly Ralph was heir to a rich and rare inheritance, while to this bright prospect his father had added the dower of rich and rare culture of mind; of marvellous experience of life and travel for one so young; of golden opportunities such as fell to the lot of few in those days.

"Show me his equal—show me another like him!" Davie had heard his master say, talking to himself, as his manner was, and, with a certain outward fling of the hand, that was with him an habitual gesture lacking neither piquancy nor grace, defying the world to match that boy of his.

Taking a leaf out of his own book, one might have said: "Where shall the world show a man equally fortunate with Geoffrey Stirling? How many parents sow in tears, to reap no sheaf of joy? How many fling pearls before swine—opportunities before those who pass them by with idle indifference? But with this man all prospereth—land to land, riches to riches, he adds as the years revolve—and the child of his love is the child of his joy and of his pride!"

Yet, could some stealthy watcher have peered through the casement of the Dale End library, would that watcher have felt that Geoffrey Stirling lived and looked like a happy man? Is restlessness a sign of content? Are strange mutterings, quick changes and transitions of manner, the marks of a spirit at peace with itself, with God, and with the world?

Or are such things the signs of a troubled mind that fain would find some cup of mandragora for trembling, craving lips to drain to the dregs, and then—ah, blissful fancy!—fall into the deep, sweet sleep of forgetfulness?

A life in which there is some mile-stone upon which the traveller dare not glance back, but must, in self-defence,

keep the eyes of his mind ever looking straight ahead, is a thing terrible indeed. To look back is to be unnerved. It is possible, or seems possible, that the consciousness of crime may urge to greatness; but this can only be when there springs from it the effort to make the future an expiation for the past. To look back and dwell upon wrong done is to fall flaccid and helpless into a slough of despair.

There lay something in Geoffrey Stirling's past life upon which he did not care to look back; some dead thing over whose white face he had drawn the shroud of resolve, and yet whose muffled form haunted his waking thoughts and nightly dreams. Was it the memory of hopes that had never known reality—of a love that had "hoped all things, believed all things," and found both hope and trust but the phantoms of a fond imagination,—that had so clouded his life? Was it the spirit of regret and the intuitive knowledge of things that "might have been," and were not, that had made him the restless, inconsistent, winning, variable, loving man he was?

How often did Cuthbert Deane and his wife Alicia ask themselves and each other these questions? How often did faithful Davie marvel within himself what was the burden that weighed upon his master's heart?

But the man lived on, living his life alone; stood by his dead wife; kissed her waxen fingers ere the coffin-lid hid their delicate beauty for ever; followed her to the grave; returned to his lonely home; was gentle, grateful—touchingly so indeed—to Alicia and her husband for all their sympathy. "And yet, through it all," as Alicia said, not without some passion, "one never felt to get really near him once, Cuthbert."

Cuthbert kissed away the tears that started to his darling's eyes; but then he turned aside with a sigh. Priest of God as he was, dowered with no small power of winning troubled souls to "open their grief," and find comfort in wise counsel and a helping hand, he saw here a troubled soul set far from touch and healing.

Dale End seemed strangely silent after Lucy died.

She had been one who liked a fuss; who aimed at being made much of, so that even her petted ailments and the

friends who came to hear about them "kept the place alive," as the black-suited servants said. Then the story of the ghost had become public property, and added to the general sense of discomfort.

A strayed white pony, that had wandered into the long avenue of yews one Sunday night, dragging a shoe, sent an under-gardener flying into the kitchen with the news that there was a white dragon with a chain about its neck, "coming up that way"; whereupon arose sobs and cries of terrified females.

No one cared to go near the lake after night-fall, and when one morning Jeremy Bindwhistle vowed he had overnight seen the ghost in the waggoner's frock for the third time (followed, too, by a hooded woman moaning and wringing her hands—an added horror), several of the servants thought they would give warning at "the month's end."

But Squire Stirling was a generous, openhanded master—in spite of the mysterious brass-bound coffer; and, after all, there was something exciting in living in a haunted house; something that made you "thought on" as Jeremy put it, when you paid a visit to the town.

Besides, it was a gruesome pleasure to feel that when you went out to walk of an evening you "never knew what you might meet"; hence, in the long-run no one gave notice, and, now that the original ghost was supplemented by a "hooded woman," the matter became doubly interesting.

"Where wast thou, Jeremy, when thou see'd 'em?" said Amos Callender, the more interested in the thing since he had been away down south when it was first mooted.

"Houldin' on to a tree," said Jeremy; "t' ground fair moved wi' me I wur that feert."

"Art 'er sure there were two on 'em this time? I'm domed if there won't be a purcession on 'em if they go on multiply-in' and replenishin' theirsels a' this gate!"

"I seed t' felly i' t' waggoner's frock, and I seed t' woman after him. She were summat like nine feet high. She rose out o' t' ground, and kep' on risin', and I seed her two hands pressed upon her bress, but I couldna' see her face for t' hood as wur over it. They passed along, and I passed along—t'other way."

Amos shook his head. He was, as he said to Bess subsequently, "mithered above a bit" with the whole affair, and (privately) regarded his boon companions of The Safe Retreat as a soft lot," not excepting little Jake, whose head was clearly turned with over-much psalm-singing.

The butler at Dale End—a man of superiority and above all such petty superstitions as ghosts, warnings, and coffin-shaped cinders flying into maids' laps as they sat round the fire—took all the chatter and wonderment among his fellows in the spirit of true philosophy.

"Just you wait," said he, "till Master Ralph comes home. There'll be brightness enough about the place that day, never fear, and the ghosts will all go packing back to—wherever they came from."

At this hazy allusion cook shuddered, but smiled the next moment as she resolved to bake a monster cake of unparalleled richness for the heir's home-coming.

Nurse Prettyman, with the reticence of an old retainer, took but small part in these discussions, which were, indeed, generally carried on behind her ample back.

Though for so many years a martyr to Mrs. Geoffrey's whims and fads, she sorrowed sincerely for her mistress, and wondered how they should tell Master Ralph that she who had been his "pretty mamma" was gone for ever from the place that now should know her no more. For it was one of the squire's whims that no one should write to Ralph to tell him of his mother's death.

"I won't have the lad travelling home with a heavy heart in his breast by day," said he, "and sad thoughts haunting his pillow by night. Time enough to tell him when he gets here and has me by his side to comfort him. I tell you I understand the boy. I know him off by heart. You'll see how tender and how wise I'll be with him. You'll see—you'll see."

And the Vicar, to whom this speech was addressed, at once gave up the idea of sending a letter to Ralph's tutor to catch the travellers before they should embark upon their homeward voyage.

"Best let him have his own way," he said to Alicia; "and maybe, after all his own way is best."

Three weeks later, when Cuthbert Deane went to the

Dale, he found its master eagerly and excitedly superintending certain Christmas decorations of the entrance-hall and library.

"I want the place to look bright," he said; "I want to let the boy see how welcome he is. There's no need to tell him of the sorrow that has come upon us in the first moment of his coming—is there? I should like to hold him in my arms just for a moment or two, and see the old bright smile upon his face—the smile that is like no other—eh, Cuthbert? Your lady-wife has a sweet smile, my dear fellow—I admit it, don't look aggrieved—a sweet winning smile, and a gentle hand, and a tender grace of pity for the sorrowful; in short, take her altogether, a most womanly woman; but to me there can be no light on earth (I should say in heaven either if you were not present, Cuthbert) like the light of my boy's smile. He's such a happy fellow is Ralph, and it is I who have made him so—I, his father whom he loves, even as I love him."

Then some compunction seemed to seize him as to his perfect content in the prospect of his son's return, a perfection that for the time being had swept aside the remembrance of his late bereavement. "Poor Lucy! poor girl!" he said, pottering after some berried holly as he spoke; "I little thought to be keeping Christmas without her. You see she was so often ailing—she was so seldom anything else. I had got used to it—it was sad, but it couldn't be helped. Being used to it, it didn't startle me, and then, as you truly say, Turtle's manner is apt to deceive—it is too conciliatory, too bland; but, my dear sir, it's worth a fortune to him! And what a good fellow he is, take him all round. Do you remember him when that fool Oxford shot at the Queen—his pockets bristling with newspapers like a fort with guns, and his wig ready to stand on end? I like Turtle—I respect Turtle—and he's a loyal soul. A man's nothing if he isn't loyal—eh? God save the Queen!"

Here Geoffrey Stirling bared his head a moment, and then busied himself over his ivy, and holly, and Christmas roses, as if there were nothing else on earth worth thinking about.

"It's the old story," said the vicar to his wife when he

went home; "nervously excitable over this or that, flying from this subject to that, never sticking long to one. The donation he has given me for our poor this Christmastide almost takes away my breath; we shall have to feed all the parish on turkey and plum-pudding—that's what it is, dear! But where's Hilda? I thought she was coming over to-day to suggest all sorts of new and beautiful ideas for our church decorations."

"Mrs. Devenant is ill," said Alicia.

"Tut, tut!" said the Vicar, "that's something new, in truth! But don't pull such a long face over it; no doubt the good woman will be better shortly. I should say her constitution was of iron."

Alicia could not help smiling. It was so easy to tell by the tone of voice in which he spoke of her that Mrs. Devenant was no great favourite with Cuthbert.

"She has taken a severe cold, and is feverish," said Alicia.

"How do you know that? Did Hilda write?"

"Yes, Hilda wrote, and I—went."

"A day like this! A wind to cut one in two! My pet—I will not have you running about after all the sick people in the parish."

"I haven't been running about after all the sick people in the parish. I've only been running about after Mrs. Devenant, and, Cuthbert—she's a nasty, cross old thing!"

"Alicia!"

"I don't care—she is! She's cross and hard to—Hilda."

"Did Hilda tell you so?"

"As if she would!"

"Just so! then you heard it for yourself?"

"I heard it for myself; and I saw the colour flush into the dear child's cheek, and the tears start to her eyes; and oh, Cuthbert, how she must wish she were back with the nuns of the *Bon Secours!*

"I am sorry you think so," said the vicar, beginning to walk up and down the room with his hands behind his back; "I am sorry you think there is cause. I dislike to think of people being unhappy just now—I mean when Christmas is at hand. One's heart always seems so full of those words,

"I am the light of the world"; one would like the Divine Light to shine into all hearts, and to be dimmed by no carking cares, no lack of love and sympathy."

There was no lack of love and sympathy in St. Mary's vicarage to dim the shine of Christmastide; but there was carking care enough before Christmas Eve came round.

For such a stormy December had not been known for years; and was not Ralph upon the high seas? Gales swept the coast; ships in the many-mouthed harbour of Becklington broke from their moorings and were drifted away to be seen no more. Day by day the papers teemed with accounts of "disasters at sea."

No one dared to speak of fears to Geoffrey Stirling; and only by increased excitability and restless energy did the man himself betray the anguish of great dread that was gathering about him.

Davie heard him muttering to himself as he fidgeted about in the library; heard him wandering up and down in the night-time; once found him sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion, flung upon his bed, all dressed as he was.

Alicia went to see him, and he made her sit beside him, held her hand in his, or gently patted it as he talked; told her of all the things that they would do when Ralph came home, and took her up stairs to look at the boy's room, ready even to the smallest detail for its longed-for occupant.

Alicia thought she got through all this very well, for her heart was full to overflowing, and once—when such a gust of wind came that it seemed as if a giant hand grasped the house and shook it, while the ivy-sprays scratched wildly at the glass, and Gaylad lifted his muzzle and howled an answer to the blast—she had some ado to keep back a sob.

She was glad to cling closely to her husband's arm all the way home; glad now and again to shelter her face against his shoulder from the sleet that drifted so madly on the wind. There was a sense of healing and comfort in his near presence, his love, his tender sympathy, that she had never needed more.

All her heart had gone out long since to that lonely, restless man, Geoffrey Stirling; the man who called her old

home his, and whose soul was bound up in the boy for whom he now agonised and waited.

As the vicar and his wife neared home, there came to them, muffled through the snow, the sound of St. Mary's bells.

"The lads are ringing in Christmas Eve," said the vicar; "in spite of storm enough to blow the old tower down."

But to Alicia the chimes had a sad and plaintive sound, muffled as they were by the thickly-fallen snow.

The light and warmth of home had never been more welcome. She hurried into the ruddy glow.

But only to start back with a cry.

For there, in the doorway of the sitting-room, stood Davie—or was it his wraith?

In his hand he grasped a paper; his face was pale; his eyes on fire with a wild passion of pain.

"The *Aladdin*"—he gasped. "She is gone down—with all hands. My God—it will break his heart!"

"Let us go to him," said the vicar, his own swarthy cheek matching Davie's for pallor, as he hastily buttoned the overcoat which he had loosened as he came in.

Without a word Alicia tied her veil close about her face. Another moment and the three were out in the blustering night, and the ruddy light of home was left behind.

"No one but I must tell him. Oh, who can love him half so well as I—or tell him half so tenderly?" cried Davie.

"It shall be as you will," replied the vicar.

So the task was Davie's.

The others waited in the hall.

Davie went in alone to the man who years and years before had carried him upon his shoulders, and sheltered him from harm.

Geoffrey Stirling was sitting by the fire-side, with Gaylad at his feet.

He was bending down to the old dog, and had laid his hand upon the sleek tawny head, just as Davie came in.

He looked up, saw the drawn white face, the streaming eyes, the out-stretched trembling hands, and, with a gasping cry, clutched the arms of his chair, leaning eagerly forward.

Flinging himself down upon his knees beside that staring figure, suing, as it seemed, for pardon for the pain he must inflict, Davie told his tale just in the words God put it into his heart to utter:

"Oh, master—master! The sea shall give up its dead, as well as the earth, when the dear Lord comes!"

CHAPTER XVII.

HUNTED DOWN.

It was said that Geoffrey Stirling had borne the double blow "wonderfully well." He certainly appeared to do so, and such as could not tell numbness from resignation might well think his endurance wonderful.

County magnates called at Dale End "to inquire," left cards, and rode away content with the account given of the squire's state of health.

They had opened social arms and received Geoffrey Stirling and his wife Lucy as of their own "set" from the first. True, both might have adorned any position in society, county or otherwise; but not in that view of the question lay the pith of the matter. Mothers with daughters to marry could not forget that Dale End was a splendid property with "the most delightful historical associations"; that it would be "an absolute sin" to let such a fine old place drop from the county; and, in short, "for the sake of the dear girls," all shortcomings (had there been any such to overlook) would have been glossed over in the father and the mother of that "charming young fellow," Ralph Stirling.

As it was, the squire himself was voted "so" interesting; and Lucy a "dear sweet sufferer"; while Ralph, listening to the comments of various matrons of position upon his mother's delicate beauty, thought how full of kindly feeling was the world in which he found himself a central and much-made-of figure.

Now all was changed.

That delicately beautiful mother had passed away—that

bright central figure, the young heir, had been blotted out from the social landscape, and the county was conscious of a dark brooding cloud over its Christmastide.

Husbands and brothers, matrons and maids, grieved for the young life cut off in its gracious adolescence, its rich promise of good things to come.

Lady Boscawen (wife of Sir Denby Boscawen of Earl's Cragg) shed tears from out of the fulness of her motherly heart, as she thought of Ralph's bonnie smile, a light put out by death's cold cruel hand, a something blithe and winsome that had warmed the world whereon it shone. She also regarded her daughter Ethel as a being defrauded of a fair prospect once opening out before her young feet.

"How well the dear boy's voice blended with Ethel's! They seemed born to harmonise; and oh, Denby, to think of that poor man's loneliness in his doubly desolate home!"

As Lady Boscawen spoke, tears chased each other down her long, aristocratic face, and Sir Denby, much moved by the sight of his lady's sorrows, promptly ordered his steed and rode in hot haste to the Dale, brimful of sympathy for its luckless owner.

Sir Denby's face was round and jovial by nature—in fact a happy contrast to the long, thin features of his spouse; but on his return from that day's ride it wore a look that made it almost haggard. He sat by the fireside with his hands thrust fiercely into the depths of his breeches-pockets, trying to stare the fire out of countenance; he whistled through his teeth; but the attempt at cheerfulness proved a failure: the tune that was uppermost proving to be of a highly lugubrious nature.

"Dear me," said Lady Boscawen, gliding in, and taking her stand behind his chair; "is anything the matter, Denby? Is Mr. Stirling——"

"I wish I'd never gone—that's what's the matter."

"Dear me!" said her ladyship again, that being her habitual ejaculation uttered in various tones, and with variety of emphasis to suit different social and domestic occasions.

"The man—the fellow you know—told me his master was as well as any one could expect 'under the circumstances,' and I got my foot in the stirrup, and was going to

fling my leg across the pigskin, when Stirling passed across the hall from one room to another. Gad! I felt like dropping, I can tell you."

"What did he look like?" asked Lady Boscawen, breathlessly.

"What did he look like? Why, like some hunted animal brought to bay; a glare came into his eyes as he saw me, like I've seen in those of a stag as it turns to face the dogs—a look that froze my blood. I stood there, I tell you, stammering and staring, and the man—the fellow, you know—seemed in a fright too."

"A fright!" echoed her ladyship. "At what?"

"Nay, how should I know? How should I know anything, if you come to that? What have I ever done to Stirling that he should look at me like that? Haven't I taken him by the hand—and held on, too—from the first day of his coming to Dale End? Haven't I been a stanch and true friend to him all along, and had that lad of his running about the place like a tame cat? Not that the boy wasn't welcome. He's one that has but to show his face to be welcome anywhere—that is, he was, you know," said Sir Denby, not a little flurried, and tripping over his tenses.

"What did Mr. Stirling say to you?" persisted Lady Boscawen, wiping away a tributary tear at that change from "is" to "was" in her husband's rambling talk.

"What did he say? What do you suppose, now? It was growing a bit dusk, you know, and who he took me for the devil only knows—what he said was this: 'Spies! spies!'"

"Denby!"

"Oh, yes, you may say 'Denby' as often as you like, but that's what Geoffrey Stirling said. The fellow heard it too. I saw him gape at his master, and then the whole thing passed like a shadow, you know."

"No, I don't know. Why can't you tell me? What passed?"

"The—fancy, or whatever it was. Stirling pushed back his hair—you know his way—and came forward with a smile to give me greeting. I tell you I felt—anyhow."

"What did you say?"

"What did I say? Made a fool of myself—said nothing. It was Geoffrey did all the talking. He had a loose black scarf about his neck, fastened by a small diamond pin. He fingered it as he talked. 'This was Ralph's,' he said. 'He was always a careless fellow. I found it by the toilette-glass in his room, lying there just as he had taken it off and laid it down. He was fond of it. I gave it to him last Christmas Day.' He spoke as if he was talking to himself, not to me nor to any living thing: then he gave a sharp look at me and said: 'You have come all this way in the snow to ask for me. How kind—how kind! Is Lady Boscawen well? And my little friend Ethel—how is she?"

By this time Lady Boscawen had entirely subsided into her pocket handkerchief, and Ethel, her bright hair streaming over her shoulders like the train of a comet, having come into the room and stood listening with wide eyes to her father's story, cast her arms about her mother's shoulders, and the two wept together.

"By Jove! but this is a cheery way for a man to keep New Year!" said Sir Denby, beginning to perambulate the room with his hands thrust into the lappet pockets of his shooting-jacket; "but I don't blame you—I don't blame you. I'm ready myself to wish that Cuthbert Deane might forbid the lads ringing the New Year in; and I tell you what it is—they may say what they like about Geoffrey Stirling bearing up wonderfully under the circumstances—they may talk what confounded nonsense they choose—they haven't seen him, and I have: and I tell you the man is crazed with grief—mad as a March hare, with the pain of the gaping wound in his heart.

Was this truly so? Had sorrow dazed the clear brain—had pain been too bitter, agony too keen? Had the astute mind, the shrewd intelligence, become warped and twisted, so that distorted images passed before the mental vision, things real and things unreal mingling in wild confusion?

"What will come of it all? Oh, Cuthbert, what are those fixed, sad eyes for ever watching?" said the vicar's gentle wife, wrought up to many a pitiful foreboding. "Do they see the cruel waters closing over that bright young head? Does Geoffrey Stirling listen for the sound of the

beating waves, for the sound of a cry coming over the waste of the waters—a cry for help where help was none? Is it thoughts like these that hold him silent, as he sits gazing somewhere far away—with Gaylad's head upon his knee, and poor Davie watching the two? What can we do—what can we do?"

"Nothing," said the vicar, laying his hand gently on Alicia's shoulder; "save wait, and watch, and pray. The man is stunned as yet, but the waking must come, and then—nay, I know not what—still, only what Gods wills *can* come."

There was silence for a few moments, and then Cuthbert Deane spoke again.

"Dear wife, I have to make confession; I have been, I fear, unjust—I have judged too hardly. Mrs. Devenant was here this morning."

"Yes."

"She came to ask after the squire, and for the first time my heart warmed towards her. I have thought her cold—hard—nay, at times, cruel."

"So she is," put in Alicia, with (for her) a brazen and determined air.

"So she is not," retorted the vicar, equally brazen, equally determined; "her lips trembled—actually trembled, as she asked for news of our friend. She was paler than even her recent illness justified. It may be that this sorrow of Geoffrey's has brought back the memory of her own trial years ago. You remember, dear, that Gabriel Devenant was—drowned? A buried sorrow often seems to rise again in the sorrow of another."

"Was Hilda here?" said Alicia.

"Yes; and she too seemed unlike herself—that sweet, grave calm that hangs about her like a delicate garment was ruffled. The unwonted agitation of the mother stirred her too; perhaps some deeper influence. I could almost have fancied from what I saw to-day that some—attachment had existed between the child and Ralph."

"A couple of children—a mere boy and girl," said Alicia incredulously; "and a pair that hardly ever chanced to meet—could hardly chance to meet anywhere save here—to say nothing of difference of position, Cuthbert."

"Yes: I know the idea seems far-fetched; it did even as it crossed the back of my stupid old head. And yet——"

"And yet what?"—this impatiently.

"Well this: Davie happened to be coming in as Hilda and her mother were leaving my study—you were out, you know, my dear, on household cares intent—and the girl lagged behind to speak to him, or rather, as it seemed, to look at him. Davie caught her hand in answer to the look, and I heard him say: 'What is it, Hilda? Are you in any trouble? Why do you look like that?'"

"Well, what did my dear girl say?"

"Pressed her hands over her eyes as if to press back tears, and said: 'I do not know—I cannot tell, but, Davie, I am full of fear, and . . . all this is so terrible about Master Ralph.'"

"How strange! What did Davie answer?"

"He said, 'This comes of listening to ghost stories by firelight; you are trembling—you have no nerves left.' And then Hilda laughed—a strange forced laugh, I thought, almost hysterical. Her mother, at the sound, turned and beckoned to the girl to hasten on. Then I saw a look of unmistakable trouble and fear in Hilda's eyes; but Mrs. Devenant was smiling back at Davie. Heavens—what a beautiful woman she must have been once upon a time, Alicia! You realise something of it even now, when her face lights up like that."

"I know—I have seen it: but to me it is always the beauty of some fierce and cruel animal; it repels me, it never draws me near."

"Still," said the vicar, "Hester Devenant is a woman who could charm—if she willed to charm, and, strangely enough, she seems to care to charm—poor Davie."

"By the way," said Alicia, "when the other two were gone, what did Davie say?"

"At first nothing. He stood by the window, watching the mother and daughter walk down to the gate. Then when they were out of sight, he came and sat down by my writing-table, leaned his arm upon it, and began to speak to me of his master."

"Of Geoffrey Stirling?"

"Yes; he told me of a strange mood that seized upon

him yesterday, a sort of frenzy as it seemed to me. Sir Denby Boscawen rode over from Earl's Cragg to inquire after the squire, and, as it happened, saw him crossing the hall. In a moment Stirling seemed roused to a sudden fury. Davie, coming down the tower-stairs, heard him mutter to himself, saw a wild look upon his face, and was hastening forward in fear and amazement, when the mood passed—as it had come—in a moment, and our friend was himself again."

"How strange!" said Alicia.

"Worse than strange," replied her husband; "for it passed but to come again. When Davie went into the library that same evening he was met by the same look, adjured to 'play the spy no more,' dismissed with averted looks and harsh words—things new indeed to Davie from his master. I have seen sorrow clothe itself in strange guise, but never in such guise as this. I shall go up to the Dale early to-morrow. I am full, dear wife, of dark forebodings."

And was not Davie also full of fear? The ghost that walked in the dark shrubberies beneath the pall-like shadow of the yews and by the shimmering lake could not be a more restless thing than Davie in these evil days that had come upon Geoffrey Stirling. Afraid to enter the beloved presence lest he should be driven forth by hard words; full of a loving, trembling fear that could not sleep; he wandered from silent room to silent corridor, here, there, and everywhere, yet ever returning, like the bird to its nest, to the near neighbourhood of the chamber where sorrow was struggling so fiercely to break a human heart.

Hitherto Geoffrey Stirling had been stunned by the weight of his own suffering. Nay, more; he had been willing to be stunned; glad to be deadened, lifeless, wrapped in a torpor that dulled each sense, and spread a filmy veil between himself and all sight and sound around him. If any prayer at all could have risen from his dulled heart, it would have been this: "Oh, God, let this torpor hold me still!"

As the frost-bitten wayfarer shrinks from the return to life that means immeasurable agony, so this wounded creature dreaded the immeasurable pain of coming to look

upon the story of Ralph's death as something that had happened to himself—something that had cut deep and clean to the root of his own life, rendering it a barren and blighted thing for evermore, instead of as a tale told to a man whom he pitied from the very depths of his soul, but was not—could not be—Geoffrey Stirling.

Was he not called the luckiest man in Becklington? Spoken of as the man who had added land to land and gold to gold? Was it likely that fortune would scatter her choicest gifts upon him and then strike so cruel a blow straight at his heart?

Some one was drowned. It was a pity. Troubles are harder to bear at Christmastide, because the whole world is then bidden to rejoice in the coming of the Prince of Peace —and some one must be in trouble dark and deep, since some one (a young boy, they said, and homeward-bound) was drowned.

* * * * * *

Long ago Gabriel Devenant was drowned. Bah! a chill and gruesome death to die—to sink away out of sight while the waters close above your head.

* * * * * *

How still the night is!

Geoffrey Stirling sits by the fire alone. Gaylad is stretched at his feet. He lies back in his easy chair; he breathes heavily, like one who is very weary, and whose heart labours at its work. His deep-set eyes are dim, more than ever sunken in their leaden orbits.

Thoughts come and go in his dazed brain. But under this turbid current of unreal and dreamy thought is a something stirring, sluggishly it is true, yet with an ever-increasing power and life.

Realisation is coming; the frozen blood is moving in the frost-bitten limbs; the dreamer is awaking to the truth of what has taken hitherto but the semblance of a vision—of a thing far off, not near.

A cry—bitter as Rachel's of old—breaks upon the quiet of the night.

"Ralph—Ralph—my boy!"

After all, it is not "some one" who is drowned—it is the child of his love, the idol of his life, the creature for whom he has lived and hoped, the creature for whom he has—sinned.

And now, mingling with the suddenly realised anguish of loss, comes the thought of that sin—the sin that has been sinned in vain—the sin that now drops to earth, a motiveless, soulless thing, as dead and profitless as the garment of mortality when the spirit that once animated it has flown.

"I did it for Ralph—for Ralph," he mutters, shrinking further and further back in his chair, as though cowering away from some ghastly presentment of a crime-stained self, staring at him from out the red glow of the living coals. "I did it for Ralph!"

How still the night is!

An hour or two more of life is all that remains to the old year, the year that has robbed him of his only son, the year whose successor seems to him a blasted, blighted thing even ere it is born.

* * * * * *

The frost is keen to-night. It grips the trees like a vice. They groan and creak under the pressure.

Other sound is there none.

Once Nurse Prettyman, urged thereto by Davie, opens the library door softly and peers in.

It is growing late, she says, will not the master take something?

At this, anger, distrust, defiance, blaze up in Geoffrey Stirling's eyes.

"What!" he cries, "are there more of you? Would you hunt me down? Leave me, I say, leave me. Do you not see that I would be alone with the thought of my boy? It is his loss that makes me like this, strange and solitary in my ways. It is nothing else—nothing else; what else should it be, indeed?"

He laughs, as if in scorn of people's idle fancies; waving to her to go—to leave him alone with the night.

Tears stream down Nurse Prettyman's face. Her ruddy cheek is pale, her eyes are dim with weeping.

Why even now, as she crossed the hall to come to her

master, the feeling of a child's hand clutching at her gown seemed to be with her—she seemed to hear the patter of little feet by her side. Since ever she knew that her darling boy was gone, that never more his strong young arms should hug her close, his laughing lips touch her cheek, sight and hearing have played strange tricks with Nurse Prettyman, and memory has given her back the child she had tended and loved as her own.

She tries to speak through her tears. She would fain set her sorrow beside her master's pain, fain win him to speak of Ralph, fain break the chain that has bound him about since the hour in which they told him that his boy would come home no more.

But Geoffrey had risen to his feet. He crosses the floor, faces her, and with a quick imperious gesture bids her once and for all—leave him.

The woman dare not disobey, and, as she steps back, the key grates in the lock of the door that a firm hand has promptly closed.

Geoffrey Stirling is alone at last; safe too from intrusion of any sort, since he has shut and locked the door between the room in which he is in and the one that lies three shallow steps below.

Alone—yet more hunted than when most followed.

For his own thoughts, like a pack of sleuth-hounds, dog his steps and hang upon his heels.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DEATH'S COUNTERFEIT.

Out from among a world of shadows in which he seemed to have lived for uncounted years—time goes by feeling, not measurement, when we are reeling beneath a crushing blow—something real, horrible, tangible came to meet Geoffrey Stirling, and stood face to face with him, showing stern resolve to grapple and to overcome.

Life seemed to have contracted for him into one narrow

pass, within whose straitened aperture stood a figure weird and wild—a figure alternately threatening and mocking in its aspect.

The purpose that had uplifted a great sin, until it almost took the guise of a mighty sacrifice, made for love's sake, was gone. The load of guilt now became as lead, for it was seen and felt in its naked, undraped deformity.

To Geoffrey Stirling, the loss of his beloved son—of Ralph, the one passionately-worshipped idol of his heart and life—was not only an immeasurable sorrow—it was a sorrow with a sting in it.

What cries the voice of conscience—the voice so long stifled—in the stillness of that quiet chamber, where a tortured man paces to and fro, from end to end, from side to side, with bent head and furrowed brow, with pain-struck eyes cast down, with working hands clasped in each other behind his back?

"You have played for colossal stakes; you have played a desperate game; you have lived a lie; you have counted the whiteness of your own soul, the cleanness of your own hands, as dross; you have basked in the smiles of the false jade called Fortune, fancying yourself her spoiled darling; and now you are ruined, beggared, bankrupt, even in the very hour of your success. The heir was coming to enter upon his kingdom; you were preparing to sun yourself in the light of his prosperity; to revel in your pride in him, to rejoice (for so you hoped it might be one day) in his happiness, wedded to one your keen and wary eyes had singled out for him. Your heart yearned for him: your longings stretched forth like mighty arms to touch him across the sea; your love went out to meet him like a trusty and loving messenger, and now—where are your dreams? There is not a withered leaf buried beneath the snow of this winter's night more dead than your dead hopes. . . . Your fond ambitions are but as dust and ashes in your mouth. . . . After the labour of the endless years you have no harvest to garner in save one of bitter sodden grain, blackened with mildew . . . foul with blight."

A hanging lamp lights the room in which Geoffrey Stirling is thus chewing the bitter cud of retrospection. Its soft glow falls full upon the picture of the dying miser.

A moment Squire Stirling stops opposite to it. He shades his eyes with his hand, as if to concentrate the whole force of his sight upon the scene so vividly portrayed.

How skilfully has the painter's hand limned the relaxing muscles of the fingers that clutch the air! How pitifully helpless is the malign mowing of the convulsed lips! How maddeningly mocking is the gleam in the dark eyes of the courtesan!

Geoffrey Stirling shakes his clenched hand at that daring, beautiful, evil face.

"It is Fate that has played the covetous harlot to *me*—Fate who has wrested *my* treasure from me. . . ."

He speaks loudly in the exaltation of the moment; then his voice breaks and falls as he moves away, sadly muttering:

"I only wanted my wealth to treasure for my darling's sake—only for him—only for him! I did not want to take it with me, or to hoard or to hold it. . . . *We brought nothing into the world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.* I knew that—I knew that. I did not want to carry it with me. I wanted to make Ralph happy—honoured—great. What are my riches to me now he is gone? Dross—dross—dross!"

He swerved a little as he uttered the last word with sad insistence, sweeping his hand across his eyes, as if to clear his vision of some gathering mist.

Then he huddled in his chair, stirring the logs, cowering over the blaze.

"I am cold," he said, "very, very cold, with a chill no fire can warm. I have been like that often of late. It is nothing though,—nothing. Turtle smiled when I told him of it. 'You grow fanciful,' he said. That's it—I'm fanciful. No wonder, either. I've led a life to wear the strongest nerves—been wary over it, too, that have I."

Here a gleam of crafty cunning narrowed the eyes that watched the blaze, and Geoffrey Stirling's long, strong hands began to pass slowly up and down the slender shanks of his attenuated form. He had clung tenaciously to the fashion of a bygone time, and now his evening dress of close-fitting black hose, meeting breeches of equally sombre hue, showed the slenderness of his limbs to the full.

"There's nothing the matter with me except that I have lost flesh of late—most men do about my time of life—and now and again I have a coldness about my legs; they grow numb, but it soon passes off. Pooh! it is not worth thinking about."

The spirit of restlessness was coming upon him once more.

Cruel truths, momentarily forgotten in the wanderings of an overstrained brain, began to show their ghoul-like faces peering into his.

Years back, at a terrible epoch in his own life, he had counted the sorrows and sufferings of others as but slight things. Now, sights and sounds, ghastly wraiths from a dead past, came crowding about him as he sat.

A pair of mad eyes, full of sombre fire, glare at him from the shadow of a slouched hat—glare at him, close to his own—through the diamond-panes of a casement that, wrenched violently back upon its stanchion, lets in the sobbing of a river against the side of a little white boat, and then—twelve deep-toned notes from St. Mary's tower vibrate on the air. . . .

Who is this woman—one among the motley crew of ghosts—with dark, grandly-outlined face bent above a heap of something soft and white upon her lap? She sews a shroud. Some one lies dead in the next room—some one for whom that shapeless garment is being fashioned. . . .

"No, no," mutters Geoffrey Stirling as this strange phantasy passes across his mental vision; "I will not see him. . . . I have been ill."

Rising from his chair, he once more paces to and fro like some wild creature in its den.

Surely these unmannerly phantoms which thrust themselves upon his notice will not crowd about him so closely if he keeps on the move.

Has he not scourged them from him all these years with the thong of his own stern resolve, and now—are they about to defy the lash?

What is this new spirit of the craven that is gathering about his heart? Why does he long to be alone—to meet no eye, to hear no voice? Why is the solitude of that silent chamber so welcome to him?

Is it that the crime of ten years ago has taken a new

semblance—a sinister and unfamiliar aspect, that makes it seem as fresh-spilt blood, instead of as blood that has long since soaked into the earth and lost its crimson dye?

He must—he will—evade these serried ranks of haunting, intangible beings. . . .

But they will not be set aside.

Here they come, seeming to pursue him as he turns.

There is a worn wan face framed in the piteous widow's cap: children cling to the woman's rusty black gown. Little Jake, the cobbler, has one child (bigger than the rest) by the hand, and is trying to lead him on; but the boy strains back to his mother, and his eyes never leave her face.

Then comes a portly figure, whip in hand; and Farmer Dale's face, robbed of its wonted cherry-coloured bloom, looks gravely and sadly at Geoffrey Stirling.

Who was it said that the farmer's eldest lad had had to give up a certain ambitious scheme of "schooling" because the bank was robbed, and all the heard-earned savings gone?

And what about Squire Ashby? How the old man blusters—vowing he will have Gaylad shot, "Aye, and the thief too if law can do it, by Gad!"

A woman with a gentle troubled face stands by the old squire; she has her hand upon his shoulder, and her sad questioning eyes are turned upon Cuthbert Deane, whose out-looking fearless glance seems to strike like a spear to Geoffrey's heart, hard to meet. . . .

Somewhere Ralph is sitting among the shadows and the goblins on the stairs. A little yellow pup nestles on his lap. The boy's hand passes softly over and over the round sleek head.

Geoffrey has to pass the couple as he goes upstairs, and the boy looks up and smiles.

The pain of this last memory is too keen.

The thong of passionate resolve is set to scourge the ghostly visions off, but the lash fails to strike them.

On, on they come, torturing him at their pleasure. . . .

Geoffrey Stirling is standing by a table whereon lies an old leather-bound book with heavy silver clasps.

There is a faint click and the volume lies open.

A moment's hesitation and with nervous hasty fingers the leaves are turned—ruffled—fall apart.

There it is—the record of his boy's birth in his own handwriting—and lower down a little patch of something that has once been of softest saffron hue, but that now is brown and faded—the withered primrose of a spring as dead as itself—a flower that Ralph, a tottering, wee thing of three summers, brought to his father as a love-gift.

At sight of this memento Geoffrey Stirling's sorrow breaks forth afresh.

He raises the filmy, fragile thing a moment in his hand, then lays it reverently down, bending to read the inscription above it:

"Ralph. Born February 14th, 1831."

"He was my valentine, sent straight from heaven. . . . He came to gladden my heart with the first snow-drops of the year; my boy—my boy!"

He is kneeling now beside the open book; his eyes stare eagerly at the words of which the ink is fading almost to the tint of the dead primrose.

For the nonce sorrow has hidden sin. The troops of sad reproachful figures that have filed before his mind's eye, a weary procession of pain, have all given place to this one tender, gentle presence from an exquisite past.

The hard-lined, clear-cut features of the man work, the thin set lips relax and quiver, the strained eyes soften, glisten, swim—and at last with a strangled sob Geoffrey Stirling lays his head on the arms that are out-stretched across the old Bible, and breaks into bitter weeping.

The dazed dull anguish of numbness that had wrapped his senses like a muffling garment is rent asunder.

Every depth of the sorrow that has overtaken him is fully sounded.

As the cry of Rachel weeping for her children because they "are not," so the cry of this desolate-hearted man went up to God, breaking upon the stillness of the quiet night.

Gaylad, with a low whine, crawls to the side of his master, and, there lying prone, shivers in his sleek skin as though the cold of the night outside were chilling his veins.

The silence, rent by the pitiful sound of a man's sobbing, is now stirred also by the soft turning of the handle of the

door, and Gaylad's whine becomes a growl, while Geoffrey Stirling, raising his tear-stained face from the shelter of his arms, starts to his feet.

As he does so the leaves of the Bible are swayed and fluttered by his hand; and, when stealthy footsteps in the corridor tell that the would-be intruder has withdrawn despairing, he looks down upon the open book, to see, not the record of his lost darling's birth, but words that seem to stand out in startling relief from their surroundings—words that his strained and exalted condition cause him to regard in the light of a dart aimed direct at himself from heaven: *Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee. . . .*

Once more he is as one standing before a narrow gorge with high rocks on either hand; once more the mocking threatening figure that typifies an awakened and accusing conscience confronts him. Once more the remembrance of sin hides and stifles sorrow.

"No, no," he mutters, shrinking back from the page wherein that dread fiat is set forth, "my time is not yet; I am hale and hearty—still in the prime of life. There is nothing wrong with me, only a little coldness now and then, a strange swimming in my head; but they pass—they pass.

Yet, even as he speaks, that strange giddiness seizes him, and he staggers to his chair to sit their all a-shake, with trembling hands, and chill dank sweat glistening on his pallid brow.

"I have lost all," he moans, "all—the chalice is emptied, save of the bitter dregs. The load I carry bears me down. It has grown heavy all at once—since Ralph died. Those who spy upon me will see how I bend and groan beneath it."

A while he sits silent, gazing at the fire, now and again stretching his hands to the flame, or rubbing them absently the one on the other, as though he would fain stir their sluggish blood to brisker movement.

How still the night is!

The last hour of the old year is waning. Eleven has long since chimed from St. Mary's tower. The cold is intense, and branches creak and cry; but there is no wind, and an exquisite purple dome, star-pied, spans the white world.

Cuthbert Deane's choir, having taken it terribly to heart that Christmas Eve had been hopeless as to weather (viewed

in reference to the singing of carols under the windows of people who were considered worthy of such delectable entertainment), had determined to make the best of matters, and, by wishing everyone a happy new year, and singing the carols so carefully practised for many weeks back, to combine the due and proper keeping of two festivals.

It is close on midnight, when they gather, a company of closely muffled figures, on the lawn at Dale End.

Gaylad has caught the rustle of their footsteps on the crisp snow, pricked up his long silky ears, and ceased for a moment to watch his master.

That master himself hears nothing. He lies back listlessly in the glimmer of the fire, slowly recovering from the ague-fit that had seized him, and pondering on the craven folly that had led him to fancy the awful warning given to one of old applicable to himself.

"I am strong—strong," he mutters, and smiles as one who looks down upon past folly from a height of wisdom.

He bares his lank and muscular wrist, closing and unclosing the long, delicately-formed, yet powerful hand.

Yes, he is strong indeed! How else could he have borne that burden of which he spoke but now—letting no man see, even by one uncertain wavering step, that he carried a load all through the long, long years?

As this thought passes through his mind he smiles; but, even in smiling, starts, turning a little sideways in his chair with his face towards the curtained window.

For a single voice, sweet and clear, comes out of the night, making it beautiful with the story of the Saviour's love to man.

Child Jesu lay on Mary's knee,
And opened wide were his sad eyes;
"Ah sleep—my little king," said she,
"Ah sleep—the stars are in the skies."
Then round about that wond'rous pair
Angelic voices filled the air.

"We sing the story of the Saviour's birth,
Peace and good-will to all on earth,
Peace for the weary and the worn,
Since Christ is born."

The last four lines were sung in chorus, and Geoffrey Stirling's hand rises and falls to the rhythm of the melody.

At first, nothing but the sweetness of the harmonised voices hits his fancy—he is an ardent lover of music, and the carol is quaint and full of harmony; but, as the chorus dies away, its promise of a peace divine and perfect, of a rest for those who are weary and heavy-laden, comes home to him. In his deep eyes dawns a wistful yearning. Success he has had, honour, greatness, the love of those about him, all these good things have been his.

But peace? When has that fair white messenger from heaven nestled in his heart and lain in his bosom?

Rest? Has he ever known it in its full and perfect sense, since a sin was sinned, and a life burdened with a terrible mystery?

Again the one sweet voice carols of that fair glad night in Bethlehem:

Child Jesu's eyes were closed in sleep,
And as He slept His Mother mild
Did bend her head and watching keep
With tears above the Heavenly child,
And still around the wond'rous pair
Angelic voices filled the air.

"We sing the story of the Saviour's birth,
Peace and good-will to all on earth,
Pardon to sin's repentant sigh—
Since Christ shall die."

The late-shed tears are scarce dry upon Geoffrey Stirling's cheek; and now—as he listens to that song of pardon and sweet pity, a fresh one gathers—and falls.

When the heart is full the voice of tenderness will cause it to overflow. That simple song seemed to the weary man who heard it as the touch of a tenderness divine—as the voice of a pitiful Saviour speaking to the heart that was "weary and heavy-laden" beneath the crushing burden of sin and sorrow.

It had told of peace, and of pardon; and it whispered of hope—a hope beyond this vale of tears and penitence.

Child Jesu woke from sleep again,
And his glad eyes were opened wide,
And Mary's heart was joyous then,
And all of Mary's tears were dried.
While still around the wond'rous pair
Angelic voices filled the air.

"We sing the story of the Saviour's birth,
Peace and good-will to all on earth,
Theirs is the glory, theirs the prize,
Since Christ shall rise!"

This time, as the chorus ends, comes the sound of hushed voices—one in remonstrance (or so it seems), several all at once—eager yet awed.

Then once more many feet crush the crisp fair snow.

Davie has dismissed the waits, telling them that the squire is ill—in sorrow—not to be disturbed.

It was, take it altogether, a bitter disappointment.

Which of the singers did not aspire to shine in the eyes of Squire Stirling? Had they not gallantly faced the possibility of meeting the Dale End ghost, to give him late, but hearty, Christmas greeting? Thus they reason among themselves, hastening their steps across haunted ground, since no good can come of lingering.

Meanwhile, a strange message has their song borne to Geoffrey Stirling.

Peace and pardon—these are then the priceless boons Christ gives to men—and yet, are not both set far from him?

Reach out as he may, he cannot touch them.

Once more he paces the floor in restless wanderings—once more the phantom brood gathers about him.

Surely, that pictured face beneath the slouched hat looks at him with the eyes of Gabriel Devenant? Here, too, comes another ghost from the limbos of the past.

It is that of a man who loved and trusted him, who—cold and hard to all the world beside—for him alone was tender; the man whose upright soul withered under the blight of dishonour; the man who died with Ralph's name upon his lips.

* * * * *

Heavily labours the heart of the haunted man, whose fancy plays him such strange tricks.

A wild light begins to burn in his sunken eyes; in his ear rings the burden of the carol singers' story.

Pardon to man's repentant sigh,
Since Christ shall die ——

"I do repent," he says, glancing from this side to that

like a hunted criminal; "I did not do it for myself; I did it for Ralph. Only give me time—give me length of years, and I will make reparation. I will—I will—I will keep nothing back. I swear I do repent! Oh, my God—give me Thy pardon and Thy peace! I have been no coward; I have borne the burden of my secret long and well. It was easy to bear while there was Ralph to bear it for; but now—it is too heavy for me—only give me time and I will expiate—I will redeem the past!"

Thicker and thicker the phantoms come about him; they gibber in his ears; they goad him to madness with their sad reproachful looks.

He ceases that weary pacing up and down. He must for the chill and the ague are curdling round his heart again. He clutches the oaken ledge of the mantelshelf, steadying himself by it.

A frenzy of mingled fear and resolve is upon him.

"It is nothing," he stammers, wildly staring at the image in the high mirror that stares back with wide dull eyes—"it is a fancy—it will pass. 'This night,' the book said—'this night.' No, no; give me time! I will confess—I will confess." . . . .

The words are panted out, as his eyes grow more and more to the image in the glass.

What does he see there?

The horrible Doppelgänger of himself—the presentiment of death in his own person.

He sees the leaden-grey colour steal over cheek and brow; sees the palsied trembling of the head; and so—the starting eyes strain and stare until that ghastly shadow of himself is veiled for ever from his sight, by the failure of thought and consciousness in his own brain.

In vain the cold fingers clutch the narrow shelf; in vain he tries to rally sense and strength. He is alone in his extremity, and that by his own act and deed.

There is a terrible hoarse cry, and Geoffrey Stirling lies a huddled-up heap upon the rug, while Gaylad, lifting his tawny muzzle, keens piteously over his master.

The clamour of many voices, and the hurry of many feet, come nearer and nearer. Some one tries and shakes the latch of the doors that lead into the garden.

Then there is a crush of glass, the strain and splintering of wood, and Davie—closely followed by Cuthbert Deane—is in the room.

With a cry, scarcely less heartrending than that uttered a moment ago by the lips now pale and silent, Davie flings himself beside the fallen man, raises the dear head to the pillow of his breast, tears open Geoffrey Stirling's vest, and thrusts his hand in above the heart that sorrow and sin have broken.

"It beats!" he cries, looking rapturously up to Cuthbert Deane, who bends above the two. "Thank God—thank God!"

CHAPTER XIX.

HESTER'S GOOD WORK.

THERE was but one opinion among the worthies of The Safe Retreat as to the cause of Squire Stirling's seizure.

"Yo' may tell me what yo've a moind," said Mr. Bindwhistle, addressing an imaginary and obstinate-minded person of assertive proclivities; "but I say as this is the way on't, and the long on't, and the short on't. Sorrow may ha' weakened Maister Geoffrey (I've nought to say agen that view o' the matter), but t' ghost knocked him down."

"Well, I dunnot know—I conna say," put in Amos, the tanner, dubiously.

Not having seen the ghost, Amos did not believe in it with the same faith and fervour as his companions.

"In course you don't know," said Matthew Hawthorne magisterially; "we none on us know, but we can spekerlate, and those on us who have given our minds to legal deductions can deduct. Why not? Therefore I say without fear or halting that I agree with Maister Bindwhistle. 'Tis a ghost to knock ony man down, mind that—a very fearsome thing even to a man of good courage and reasonable mind. How much more then to one weakened with lamentable grief! Neighbour Jeremy argufies well. He is one to edify——"

"It scrabblet on 't panes wi' its fingers," said Softie timorously; "it's a way them soart have, and a sorry way too. It's a way to mak' a mon troy to get in 's own boots yed foremost."

"Aye, aye, so 'tis," assented the constable; "and like enoo, when Squire Stirling drew asoide t' curtain to see what was oop, why, theer it stood, wi' no more loife in 'ts face than a dead fish."

"'Tis no wonder he gev' a skrike and fell right down a-top of hisself," said Jake. "My own legs shook under me that toime as I seed 'un flittin' through the trees like a Jack-o-lantern—that did they!"

"If thee hadn't such a scarecrow of a body a-top of 'em, thy legs 'ud mostly shake under thee, Jake. They're but frail props fer to be a mon's mainstay i' loife, and that's the truth on 't," said Amos.

The good man was not a little sore in that his companions had seen what he had only "heard tell of"; and that, in consequence, their words were looked upon as more weighty than his; hence his sharpness to Jake.

"They're the best as t' Lord has giv' me, anyway," retorted the cobbler, "and if so be they're found in the way of righteousness they're as good as the stoutest."

"So they are, so they are," put in Farmer Dale from the chimney-corner, where he had been more than usually thoughtful all the evening; "and long may it be ere they forget the way to The Safe Retreat, for wi'out thee, lad, our meeting 'ud be same as a glass of home-brew wi' no yed to speak of. Thou'rt the life and spirit o' us, little un—that's what 'tis."

Amos growled something low down in his interior which no one thought it wise to hear. Then his better nature asserted itself, and he looked round the assembly with a twinkle of fun in his eyes.

"I'm a bit cross-grained to-night, chaps," he said, "I'm ruefu' minded i' the matter of that there sperrit; I can't stomach bein' the ony one of yo' as hasn't seen 't."

"Yo' might ha' had my place wi'out payin' for 't," whined Softie; at which a hearty laugh restored the general good humour.

But the jolly farmer's laugh did not ring so true as was

its wont, and, when the merriment had died away, he spoke gravely and with a grave look upon his face.

"Eh, but, mates," he said, "moy moind's sore troubled thinkin' on t' squire. Such ups and downs as he's had this mony a year back! Heart-broke along o' the bank robbery; heart-broke for each one on us as though it were for hisself—aye, and wur, too; raised oop to riches and greatness as a body may say, set i' the shoes o' them as was once great theirsens, and now, woife and choilt gone like shadders, and him a lonely suff'rin' man, laid so low by God A'moighty's hand, that there's not one of us po'r 'umble chaps but is better off this day; aye, lads, but it's a sorry tale, and the ways o' the Lord is past findin' out!"

"Yo' may say that," chimed in Jeremy, "for wheer would yo' find a tenderer 'art than yon that's well-nigh broke? It has often seemed to me theer's neer a fleawer nor a bird but what Squire Stirling loves it. To see how tender he is a handling the leastest blossom, and to see him feedin' the burdies when t' frost pinches 'em! 'Look at that bright-eyed little chap,' says he to me, 'twas on'y a day or two ago; and theer wur a tommy-tit wi' 's scrap o' a tail jerkin' up and down same as if some one wur' pullin' it wi' a string, and he lookin' at t' squoire as hardy as yo' please, and chirpin' as he pecked up t' croombs. All loves him, and none fears him—that's the pattern o' mon t' Squire is."

There was a little silence after this, broken only by the whistling of breath through many pipes, and the sough of the wind in the big thorn-tree that stretched its long branches above the porch outside.

"I never think of Maister Ralph wi'out feelin' for all the world as if I'd swallowed my own last," said Jake presently.

He spoke softly, as we are all wont to speak of the dead; tenderly, as it behoves us to speak; and heads were nodded, pipes and all, in a universal assurance of sympathy.

"It fair comes over me to believe the thing," said the farmer; "he were so bright and bonnie, he'd such a laughing eye, such a cheery way wi' him."

"Aye, the father's own son, every inch of him. When he looked at you, your 'eart were drawed out o' your bress," said old Hawthorne. "Why, when my missus were sick last autumn was a twelvemonth, down he come on that

there pony of his, and a bottle-neck stickin' out of each of 's pockets. 'Here's stuff to mend the missus, Matthew!' says he, and sure enoo' 'twere some port wine as had belonged to t' ould squire and be'n in the Dale End cellars sin' the Lord knows when. Eh, my, my! but to think he's gone fair caps me—so it does."

"They say t' squire never spoke nor stirred for more nor three days after they got him leein' on t' floor like a dead mon, wi' t' ould dog keenin' over him fit to break yer 'art to hear," said Jake, with an apologetic glance at Mr. Bindwhistle as to one who was doubtless more intimately conversant with the state of family matters at the Dale than any one else present.

Jeremy accepted the situation with a dignified nod, taking up his parable with readiness.

"For once folk say true. T' squire never spoke nor stirred for three whole days; on'y moan't a bit now and agen, and drawed his breath 'eavy, same as tho' each breath were a sigh. Then hoo perked up a bit, looked about 'un, and asked if Maister Ralph wur whoam? Yo' may say that wur a poser for all consarned. Well, the vicar he up and said as how the young master weren't arrove yet, at which Squire Stirling turn't his face to t' waa', and says he, 'It's on'y a little more waitin'': which didn't mend matters for them as stood by wi' their hearts i' their mouths, an' the yare o' their eds like to stand oop on end same as my sparrar-grass i' spring-time.

"No more it didna," said the farmer with a guttural gruffness that was the outcome of emotion.

"Tak' it a'together," continued Jeremy, "Dr. Turtle is of a mind to look upon things as better than he expected, for t' squire's limbs seem less dead-alive than they wur, and he don't seem so dazed i' th' yed; but he needs a deal o' watching,' and they're fair wore out, to say nothing of Nurse Prettyman settin' up a quinsey on her own account at such an ill-convenient time. Then the boy Davie has had to set out down south and mak' inquiries about that missing ship, which, as is reported, went down wi' all hands, in the gale as swep' our coast wi' its tail-end on Christmas Eve, and went near to suck down a brig as had sighted her and had tried to make for her, but was drove to sheer off."

"As I hear," put in the farmer at this point of Jeremy's narrative, "Gabriel Devenant's widow has gone oop to Dale End to give a hand wi' the nurse-tendin', and (as I'm told) she's a dab at such-like work."

"I wur comin' to that," said Jeremy, aggrieved. "I wur workin' my way round to that, neighbour, if yo' hadn't ta'en t' words out o' my mouth."

"She's a fine figure of a woman is Mrs. Hester Devenant," said Amos Callender, with the air of one who is a judge in such delicate matters: "but I'm not so sure she's one as I'd care to have a watchin' of me when I was laid low. There's a deal too much of the Siserrer about her for that job, to my mind."

"What art 'ee drivin' at?" said the farmer, his face broadening to a grin.

"Her as wur so handy wi' t' joiner's tools as some fule had lef' lying handy," replied Amos sententiously.

"Well, if *she* hit the reet nail on t' yed, *thee* hasn't," laughed the farmer. "'Tis Jael yo' mean, mon, and a rare bad wench she wur, too, full o' deceit and lies. I'd fain hope as she as has gone to watch by Squire Stirling ain't fashioned after such a sorry pattern. It says summat for Hester Devenant that she took upon hersel' so charitable an office."

"They say," persisted Jake (who had no mind to lose his reputation as the best-informed gossip in Becklington), "that she went to the vicar and entreated, even with sighing and tears, to be let tak' a hand in a' the watchin' and tendin' up at the great house, so that he had'na the heart to say her nay. I'm told that her own daughter spoke up for her and said how marvellous well she nursed an old Frenchman years ago, and how he couldn't abide her out o' his sight—and that's how the thing come about."

"She's not one given to much sighing and tears isn't Hester Devenant, all the same," said the farmer; "I mind well meet'n' her the very night as p'or Gabriel put hisself away, and her eyes were dry—aye, an' bright too—though she wur sore beset, as ony mon might see; pale as yon ghost we wot off, and wi' her honds twistin' and turnin' and squeedgin' one in the other like livin' critturs in pain. She's lived a lonesome life has Hester Devenant, and kep'

the world at arm's-length, as the sayin' goes; but she's come out o' hersen at last and done a good deed; for the vicar's lady is sick and Nurse Prettyman laid by, and it really wants a female-kind, and no mistake, to see to a sick man; while, as to paid nurses, they're not good for much, bein' fuller of thought for to pamper their own stommicks among strange victuals than for the sick and sufferin' as is given over to their care."

Assuredly no lighter-handed, softer-footed nurse never held sway in a sick-room than Hester Devenant—at least, such was the verdict of Dale End. It seemed as if all hardness, all coldness of character, had dropped from her like a mere husk or garment as she crossed the threshold of Geoffrey Stirling's room.

Cuthbert Deane, eager to make reparation for all past injustice towards her, went almost joyfully home to tell his spouse of this pearl of price that had been found, this quiet helpful woman who had come forward to lend her aid to a good and holy work.

"The whole place seemed to change—the room and everything in it. She has such a gift of orderly management as I never saw equalled," said the vicar with enthusiasm. "Turtle was delighted with the intelligent way in which she grasped the whole aspect of the case: and I am glad to be able to come home to you to-night, for you are very sadly, my poor Alicia!"

His poor Alicia, having taken a violent cold, had no voice, or only the husky remnant of a voice, to answer him with; but, even making all allowances, he could not forbear the reflection that illness makes even the sweetest nature more or less petulant, for Alicia showed little warmth of interest in the story of Mrs. Devenant's excellent qualities as a nurse, and even drew her hand somewhat abruptly from her husband's—that nest in which it ever loved to nestle—as he enlarged upon the theme.

"I am sorry she is there—sorry she has got into the house at all. I am very wicked I dare say, Cuthbert, but I thoroughly distrust her, and—I love the squire. Yes, you see, I do not mind calling him by the Dad's dear old name. He has been so good to me—so good to me!"

Here Alicia's hoarse utterances began to break into sobs,

and her husband could think of nothing better to do than to draw the poor aching head upon his shoulder, and touch the ruffled hair gently with loving fingers.

"Nobody liked Mrs. Devenant less than you, at one time," persisted Mrs. Deane, taking kindly enough to the position assigned her, but determined to have her say, nevertheless.

"I know," returned the vicar sadly; "but it was an unjust prejudice, and I set it aside once I recognized it to be such."

"It wasn't, it was an instinct—it was true—like the instinct that prompted you to go up to Dale End ever so late on New Year's night: never to mind putting your boots on again, and taking off your nice warm slippers, and setting off in the bitter cold—but just going because the instinct prompted you, and brought you to poor Davie's aid when he needed you so sorely. I believe in instinct; and I tell you I instinctively distrust that woman, and feel—yes, dear Cuthbert, I know—that there is something strange about her, something bitter and terrible—held down, if you will, kept in check, but still there."

It is hard work talking when your throat is raw, and every word hurts lamentably, and Alicia was red and breathless when she had said that say of hers.

"Was Hilda here to-night?" were the vicar's next words.

"Yes; I wanted her to stay, being alone; but she would not: she said she was restless and would rather spend the night at home. Hilda has grown very fond of the White House: she says she loves to listen to the sound of the river as she lies awake."

"She is a strange child."

"Hardly a child, Cuthbert, now. Hilda is fast growing into a woman; in heart and mind she is older than her years; but you are right, dear, she is strange, more especially of late."

"How so?"

"She has taken Ralph's death to heart terribly—and besides, there is a kind of fear over her. I cannot tell of what. Sometimes I fancy she does not know herself—sometimes I fancy it is fear of one with whom perfect love should make fear impossible."

"Her mother?"

"Who else should it be?"

"Dear wife, you are full of prejudice—a prejudice that I, alas! helped to build up—full of a sick woman's fancies, too, to-night."

Truly it seemed so, for at that very hour, had any one glanced through the windows of the "squire's rooms" at Dale End, they might well have thought Hester Devenant no poor representative of woman in the character of a "ministering angel."

Her soft clinging robe made no rustle; the black lace that coifed her beautiful head suggested nothing but the soothing idea of a sister of mercy. Long since her shapely hands had acquired a softness and fairness that betrayed no trace of the homely toil of earlier days. The farmer's daughter might have been a duchess for any signs of rustic origin that clung to her nowadays.

She stood opposite the tall, narrow mirror in which Geoffrey Stirling had seen his own death-stricken face reflected. One hand rested on the narrow shelf, the other lay in the strong grasp of Davie. Davie—worn and weary with long and hurried journeying—weary and worn too with fruitless searchings into the fate of the ill-starred *Aladdin*.

If one ray of hope had ever shone that hope was gone.

Should Geoffrey Stirling awake to the reality of all things—should that mist of confused thought that now veiled his senses clear away—should he ask if any tidings of his son—his only son—had reached the ears of those about him, no answer was possible save that all had been done that could be done—and that naught was of any avail.

"That is what Dr. Turtle fears," said Mrs. Devenant; "his waking once more to the fresh knowledge of his loss——"

"But you," said Davie eagerly, "you think more hopefully? You have fewer fears?"

"My opinion does not count for much."

"With me it does. You are always—have always been—so wise; you must know better than the rest; and do you think, dear Mrs. Devenant, that my master may yet live—yet be restored to us?"

He trembled with eagerness as he spoke. He seemed to

hang upon her lips for an answer. He had travelled far. Forgetful of his physical needs in the intensity of anxiety that possessed his soul, he had eaten little. Now the strain began to tell.

He sank wearily into Geoffrey Stirling's chair, laying his head back and looking wistfully up to Hester.

"Davie," she said, and her pale face lighted up with that wonderful smile that had set Gabriel Devenant's heart beating in the old days, "you are tired out. Fancy—just for this once—that I am your mother, and you a child bound to obey. Go and rest. Ask me no more questions. To-morrow will be time enough to talk these matters over. You leave your master in safe hands. You may take your fill of sleep. Do as I tell you, boy."

With the last word, Hester bent her tall head suddenly, and just touched with her lips the broad brow from which Davie's fair locks fell back.

He caught her hand, pressing it to his heart, his lips.

"Yes," he said, "yes; let me call you mother. I, who have never known a mother's love, shall know it henceforth and for ever, and Hilda——"

But a hand was laid upon his mouth, stifling his words.

"See," said Hester, "the door is ajar, he hears you, and is stirring. Go?"

"One word," he whispered. "It is beautiful to find you here, doing a beautiful work. Good night——mother!"

Again he would have caught her hand, but she waved him back; and so, softly, for fear of disturbing the sick man, he went to seek the rest so sorely needed.

CHAPTER XX.

NEMESIS.

King Frost had abdicated. His silver chains no longer bound every rill and stream. Like children freed from a stern restraint, brooklets and rivulets leapt and tumbled

riotously. Buds were beginning to swell—ever so little, yet enough to make the hearts of the birds rejoice. Was not Valentine's Day past, and pairing-time at hand?

Of the sparrows that roosted in the ivy round the mullioned window of the squire's room one or two chirped faintly in their sleep, as though their rest was disturbed by dreams of joys to come.

Hester heard them as she walked slowly and deliberately round the now darkened chamber, lamp in hand, noting all things, overlooking nothing.

She heard, too, a long, low, moaning sigh come shivering from the thick boughs of the yew-trees, as though the soft dank breath of the thaw-wind played on the strings of a mighty æolian harp.

The last echo of Davie's departing footsteps had died away some while back; a servant had come in, piled up fresh logs on the hearth, asked if Mrs. Devenant required anything, and, being answered in the negative, had noiselessly withdrawn.

From distant parts of the house the clink of bolts and bars had come, and then died into silence.

Only the moan of the wind, only the rare soft chirp of the sleeping birds, and the scratching of here and there a branch against the glass, broke the stillness of the night.

From the lower level of the inner room shone the faint glimmer of a shaded light.

The situation was a lonely one for Hester Devenant, with none save a dying man to keep her company, and a sleeping household around her. To a timid woman the position might have been a trying one as well. But Hester's pulses beat fast and full; a rich spot of colour burned on her cheek; a fire—scarcely of heaven, yet bright and beautiful—shone in the eyes that had once bewildered Gabriel Devenant as they gazed at him, like stars set in a dusky night, from out the shadow of a gipsy bonnet.

She had planned and waited, wearied and toiled, all though the long, long years, and now the reaping of her harvest was at hand; the hour that she had yearned for was nigh.

If she had not prayed, "Lord, deliver him into my hand," that had been the thought of her heart, the bent of her will, ever since she met the glassy vacant stare in her dead

husband's eyes, and knew that the dearest thing earth held was wrenched from her passionate hold. So blinding is a mad spirit of vengeance that, in her conviction that Geoffrey Stirling was Gabriel's murderer, Hester forgot her own share in the murder of a man's life—the wreck of his happiness. What of the weary years of jealous dispeace? What of the nagging tongue, stinging to madness with its sharp utterances, like the bite of a thousand winged creatures? Had not these undermined the strength of a naturally weak character in such fashion that beneath the blow of sudden pecuniary loss the enfeebled brain reeled, and death grew, to a vision blurred and dazed, a thing more desirable than life?

All this had Hester long since forgotten. She had so reasoned herself into a belief of her own blamelessness that no soul appeared whiter, no hands cleaner, than her own.

She had thirsted for vengeance. She had been tied and fettered by a chain of enforced silence, and under this pressure the spirit of revenge within her had intensified, as any compressed force must; and now this consuming thirst would be slaked; desire would culminate in fulfilment.

Looking curiously at this or that surrounding of the man who was now given over into her hands, Hester was conscious of all the heat and turmoil of a hunter who finds himself at last upon the trail of a prey long stalked.

She stood a moment opposite the dying miser, her excited nerves thrilled to the swift conviction that the dark woman in the background bore a certain resemblance to herself. She shivered with a fierce throe of triumph as she stared at the distorted face of the moribund.

"Geoffrey Stirling is helpless," she muttered, her hand clenching and falling to her side; "helpless as that dying wretch; and—in my power. I have waited, and now—my hour has come."

As if the vehemence and bitterness of her thoughts had in some subtle way touched him, and he felt a need for help and comfort, the sick man began to stir uneasily, calling in strange and husky tones for "Davie."

In an instant the listener's passionate mood sank into calm. Once more the vengeful, threatening Nemesis became the admirable nurse—the ministering angel.

Hester passed noiselessly through the doorway, down the three shallow steps, and to the sufferer's side.

The restlessness that had for many years past been one of Geoffrey Stirling's salient characteristics had now become intensified to a disease. The poor blasted brain held one dominant idea, more distinctly and pronouncedly than all others. He was pursued, hunted, spied upon. He must be furtive, yet active—wary, yet up and doing. The lifelessness of his limbs, the numbness of all his faculties, seemed to his distorted imagination bonds and fetters forged by cruel enemies. At times it had been needful to administer the strongest opiates. Even these occasionally failed, and a ghastly tottering figure with bent back and shaking limbs would wander round the rooms, peer from the windows, cringing at a moving shadow, starting at a sound.

To have restrained the sick man by force at such times would have driven him to phrensy. There was, therefore, nothing for it but to follow him; answer his sudden questionings with what tact and invention the watcher might possess; and be thankful at heart when he sank at last into the stupor of exhaustion that passed for sleep.

That a certain person or persons should be artfully foiled in their attempts to gain access to him, together with a piteous pathetic looking forward to the day of Ralph's coming as to a day of perfect safety from their machinations, were notions that vividly possessed Geoffrey Stirling's mind.

"Who can it be that he fears and flies from?" said Davie, after one awful night of watching, to Cuthbert Deane; "I do not believe he ever had an enemy in his life! How should he indeed?"

The vicar could only repeat what he had said a dozen times before—namely, that Dr. Turtle looked upon these delusions as the result of partial palsy of the brain, and that the eminent consulting physician who had been summoned from London to give his verdict upon the case had expressed the same opinion. All of which things Davie knew as well as the vicar, yet somehow seemed to be dissatisfied with the knowledge.

But for the last week or so there had been an improvement. The sick man had, at longer and rarer intervals,

insisted upon rising and being dressed *en fête* to greet his boy's return, and had taken to wandering in the library. Less and less often had he hunted aimlessly among papers and books, the while he made Davie lower the blinds because there were "eyes" that watched him from the world outside.

Dr. Turtle had plucked up a slight hopefulness about his patient, and, taking his "pinch" with a more jaunty air than had been his habit since the squire's seizure, told little Jake that things were "mending a bit" up at the Dale. To this that worthy replied, that, from all he could hear, "things ud' need a mort o' fettlin' to be anything loike, and wur summat after the pattern of a boot as must ha' new top-leather, new sole, and new heel, to be fit for owt."

From which it may be gathered that Becklington thought badly of the squire's condition on the whole, and that Dr. Turtle's newly-fledged hopefulness slid from the general mind like water from a duck's back.

"That's t' worst on t' doctor," was Jake's subsequent comment; "he'd sooner choke than say as a felly's deein', and is one as would ax you, wi' a cheerful kind of a smile, how you wur comin' on, when you wur just a goin' off, and hadn't ony breath lef' for to contradic' him wi', so willy-nilly must let him ha' t' last word; which is hard on a deein' chap, put it how you will."

Like a good physician, Dr. Turtle was delighted in having secured a good nurse for his patient. He and the vicar shook hands long and cordially over Hester Devenant's introduction to the sick room.

"Might have been born in a hospital!" said the doctor enthusiastically. "No fuss, no noise, everything like clockwork, and—which is, my very dear sir, a most important adjunct in such a case as that of our friend—a gentle firmness of will that is priceless—absolutely priceless!"

Dr. Turtle would assuredly have continued to rate Mrs. Devenant's tact and firmness in the highest manner had he seen her enter the sleeping-room at Squire Stirling's call, and at once set herself to calm and quiet a fit of restless excitement that had just seized upon him. He heard this noise: he heard that. He was convinced that Ralph was even then arriving. He was sure the window curtains were

not securely closed: he had seen the gleam of an evil eye watching him as he dozed. Doubtless some enemy lurked in the thick shadow of the yews. Would some one see to it, please?

Hester spent neither time nor strength in contradiction. She crossed to the window, and disarranged and re-arranged the thick curtains of crimson cloth, the while her patient chuckled to himself to think how keen-sighted he had been.

He sat crouching over the fire in his favourite attitude, rubbing his hands over and over each other, and now and again passing them along his shrunken legs.

He wore his knee-breeches and long black waistcoat, and above these a flowered dressing-gown, which ever and anon he hugged about him as though, even in that heated room, he was conscious of a chill.

"The cold is in my bones," he said—"in my bones."

It was wonderful how his face had dwindled in these few weeks' illness; how sharp were the cheek-bones: how sunken the eyes, how defined the hollow lines of the face. On his head was a small black skull-cap, and from beneath it strayed the grey locks that had taken to grow thin and lank.

He peered curiously at Hester as she moved about; several times putting his hand to his brow as if some broken memory that would not be recalled in its entirety tormented him.

"So you are the nurse?" he said presently, in that strangely altered voice that few would have recognised for that of the man whose clear mellow tones rang over the heads of the people one sunny morning long ago, when a great and terrible sorrow befell the good town of Becklington.

"Yes; I am the nurse."

"I hope you know your duties?"

"I hope so too."

"That's well. Ha!" he exclaimed, as Hester's foot in passing tripped somewhat roughly against the old brass-bound coffer by the window, "have a care—have a care! That's my money-box, you know. No fooling with it, if you please."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Hester. "I did not know."

"Of course you didn't know till I told you. How should you—eh?"

The idea of his own sharpness tickled him. He hugged his gown about him, chuckling.

"It is very late, Mr. Stirling, will it not please you to undress and try to sleep?"

"No; it will not please me to undress. I may have to start at a moment's notice; or Ralph may come. You would not have me unable to go forth to greet him, and to meet him, would you? I had the barber to shave me this morning. I must be all ready, I tell you—all ready. I took you for a sensible woman from the look of you, but, after all, I see you are only a fool—like most of your sex."

Hester was making the fire up, and redding up the hearth for the night. She might have been stone-deaf for all the notice she took of this last compliment.

"By the way," said Squire Stirling, who had pushed back his chair to make way for her, and was steadily watching the beautiful profile that showed like a cameo in the ruddy glow of the blaze, "did I hear Davie's voice just now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Had he—" (this with a restless glance round the room) "come from the bank?"

"No; he has been a long journey; he is tired, and I persuaded him to go to bed."

"Good; but I hope he will tread softly going up stairs. Lucy cannot bear to be disturbed, she says it shatters her nerves; besides—there is Ralph. Did you ever see the lad asleep? No? You cannot think how pretty he looks, with his cheek pillowed on his palm, and his hair tossed and tumbled about the pillow! I have bent over him many a time, and thought that there was no fairer sight to see in all the dear God's fair world. You should have seen him crossing the floor, and coming to me, with his white night-dress gathered in his hand, and his little pink toes peeping from beneath it; his eyes shone like the stars of heaven, and his lips quivered. He held out his hand to me—so——"

"Yes?"

"And there lay the golden coin——'It's for them, dad,' he said."

"For whom? I do not understand."

"And yet you call yourself a clever woman. Pooh!"

But Hester would not let him drift from those old memories that held him in subtle chains to-night.

"You said I was a fool a while ago," she said, quietly going on arranging various medicine phials on the mantel-shelf.

"Did I? Well, if I did, I meant it."

"No doubt; and, therefore, remember squire—fools need to have things explained to them."

"True, true."

"Tell me—I am a fool and cannot divine for myself—who did little Ralph mean that golden coin for?"

"For the people, to be sure—the people who were 'sad and sorry'—the people who had lost their money."

"When the bank was robbed?"

"When else? Come nearer (there are spies about, set on by my enemies), and I will tell you what became of—that golden coin."

Hester came near; her heart seemed beating in her ears; her hands were growing chill.

After all she was not so strong as she had fancied herself. She had nerves like other women, and when played upon they trembled. Yet she must not betray any agitation, or with quick characteristic cunning Squire Stirling would say no more.

She stood beside the chair in which he lay back, resting one hand upon it to steady herself.

"A coin like it I sent to a poor widow—a woman with three children whom little Jake the cobbler befriended."

"I know," said Hester, incautious for once.

"How the deuce should you know anything about it?" said Geoffrey Stirling, turning sharply up to her a face full of suspicion and anger; "you are a stranger here."

"I mean that I know—what you tell me."

"Ah, just so; just so," he answered, mollified. "Well, I gave a coin like it to her; but the one that my boy brought me down that night is here—here on my heart. I have worn it as a charm all these long and weary years. Ah me! such a long, long time—and, look you here, if I die while you are near me see that it is buried with me."

"Why should the years have been long and weary to you, Squire Stirling—a man so fortunate, so lucky in every way?"

"Now, who told you that? I didn't?"

"Other people told me——" she began.

"The gossiping knaves!" he cried, interrupting her promptly; "the idle, good-for-nothing varlets?"

"But she showed something, at this juncture, of that calm strength of will which Dr. Turtle had so lauded in her.

"Neither knave nor varlet told it me," she said; "it is but what all the world knows."

"Well, well," he said, speaking like a fretful child, and moving his head uneasily from side to side; "don't rate at me, there's a good soul. I'm weak, very weak—a poor broken down old man, old before his time; but it will all pass—all pass. I shall be as well as ever. It is this coldness in the legs that bothers me; but Turtle says it is a fancy—a mere fancy—it will pass. Who knows but I may be standing on the terrace well and strong, to greet my boy when he comes?"

"Across the flood, across the main,
The heir is coming home again . . . home again . . .
home again . . ."

He crooned these lines in a feeble quavering voice, lifting his hand to the tune.

"'Tis a quaint old song that," he said, smiling; "Lucy used to sing it—she had a sweet voice and a gentle manner, had Lucy; she made a pretty picture, I can tell you, seated at her harp."

"The heir is coming home again . . . home again . . ."

Here a sudden trouble, a sudden agitation, stirred him.

"They said some one was drowned. Did you hear that tale too among your magpie friends? Some one who was coming home, and—never came. A sad story that! I think it was Davie told it me. I am sorry for those who watched in vain—indeed I am. Are not you?"

"Very sorry."

"So the chattering daws told you I was rich, did they?"

"Yes—and happy; therefore I wondered why you should have sorrow and sadness. What could weight the years for you so that they should pass wearily?"

"'The heart knoweth its own bitterness.' The man who wrote that was wiser than you, though you do count yourself so clever. And, may I ask if you take me for a fool—like yourself—that you think I should tell you the bitterness of mine? Every life has its troubles. I dare say yours has had its fair share."

"More—more," she said, not without some passion of voice and gesture.

"There!" he interrupted impatiently, "don't whine. I never did—never! But I forgot—you're a fool."

For an instant there was a flare in the dark eyes of the woman by his side that might have warned him he was not dealing with such an one. But the gleam of anger died as quickly as it had come. Hester knew that she must hold herself well in hand, or the game would be lost.

As it was, she did not despair of victory.

"Where has Davie been? You said 'on a long journey.' They should not have sent him without telling me. Was it my uncle's doing? Were they following up some—clue?"

"They hoped to do so."

"They won't catch him—not they! I tell you he is a wary fellow."

"Who?"

"The man who robbed the bank. Who else should it be?"

"Who else, indeed? And you are right, Squire Stirling. He must have been wary indeed; a clever knave, in very truth."

"You don't say so?"

The sunken eyes were narrowed to mere slits of light, like a cat's in the sunlight; the thin face projected in a ghastly mocking grin.

"Yes, I do," said Hester, whose lips, in spite of herself, shook ever so little; "Clever as the Father of Lies himself."

Nothing but a low laugh answered her.

The night was wearing on. The birds no longer twittered in their dreams, for the dead of night lay like a pall upon the world, benumbing all nature to deepest

slumber. Even that breath from the south, the soft thaw-wind, seemed to have sunk into silence.

The sick man, whose nerves were like an instrument shattered and strained, yet upon whose flaccid strings a persistent hand ceases not to play, was showing signs of extreme exhaustion. On his temples, where the hair fell back, glistened the sweat of weakness; a purple tinge had gathered about his lips; his eyes were heavy and dull.

Once more Hester importuned him to retire to rest. But he roused to hot anger at her words.

"At all events, lie down, sir, and take your sleeping-draught."

"Yes," he said, "I should like to sleep. I am tired, tired, and my head his heavy. It is like lead. My eyes burn like hot coals. Give me the dose."

"Not unless you lie down."

For once he gave in to her will and laid him down upon the bed, falling back wearily upon the heaped-up pillows.

"Cover my feet," he said, "they are cold. I can see them, but I cannot feel them."

She laid a thick fur rug across his knees, and moved to the array of bottles on the mantel-shelf. She took up a graduated phial, poured out a full dose as indicated by the bars across the glass; then to this added half as much again.

She carried it to the bedside and placed the drinking-cup to his lips.

"See here," he said, pushing it away; "promise to wake me in a moment if Ralph comes. I must be the first to greet him as he crosses the threshold of his home; mind you that. I am all ready, you see; there need be no delay. Do you promise?"

"I promise—if your son comes—to wake you."

"Here's to my boy!" he said, and tossed off the potion as though it were nectar and he led a toast.

* * * *

It can be no mere fancy that the wind has sunk to rest, for all is so still that every breath the sick man draws is heard with strange distinctness.

The curtains of the bed fall from a brazen ring high up against the wall, and cast a shadow on his face, but his hands

lie out where the glint of the fire catches them, and they may be seen to grope and stir uneasily at intervals.

Broken mutterings, too, come now and then from the lips that do not lose their firm lines even in sleep.

Hester, motionless as a statue, and not unlike one in her statuesque beauty—sits by the fire. There is a look of waiting, of enforced patience, of restrained passion on her face, and her eyes never leave the figure on the bed.

A desperate, vengeful woman, with all the hoarded venom of years seething in her heart, she awaits the moment when victory or defeat must be hers.

She has cast her all upon one die, she has formed her plot, and now—will success crown her?

She rises, draws aside the curtain, and bends to look at the sick man's face.

The restless hands are still; the strained eyeballs are half covered by the drooped lids.

Now, on both sides, she has drawn the curtains fully back, and tucked them away behind the framework of the bed.

Hester has stirred the fire into a hotter blaze. As one who lights up a guest-chamber in honour of coming festivity, she sets every waxen taper alight in the brazen sconces on either side the mirror. These, reflected, fill the whole room with a soft radiance. She locks the door between the rooms, listening intently a moment before closing it.

The outer door, leading from the bedchamber into the corridor, is, she knows—or thinks she knows—already fastened.

These things accomplished, she stands a moment—not irresolute, but gathering her forces together to meet a supreme need.

She goes up to the prone figure on the bed, lifts the head and shoulders in her strong arms, and places an extra pillow so as to support the squire in a more upright position.

She removes the velvet skull-cap; wrings out a sponge in cold water, passes it over the face, and then dabs it sharply on the palm of either hand many times. Finally she calls the stupefied man by his name, putting her mouth close to his ear.

The heavy eyes still remained half-closed, the hands flaccid and limp.

But Hester sees, with a thrill of triumph, that on either hollow cheek a hot fever spot begins to burn, and the parched lips move, though as yet they utter no sound.

Again she moves the inert frame upon the pillows; again she utters Geoffrey Stirling's name.

She is beginning to feel certain of success, for the strong narcotic is turning into a strong excitant. The man before her is rapidly becoming that most helpless and pitiable of all creatures, one under the influence of opium, not in sleep, but in delirium.

The spirit of eagerness is taking possession of Hester Devenant, hurrying her on whether she will or not.

The squire's eyes are now open wide; they shine, and yet an awful film is between them and the world on which they gaze. A heavy sigh heaves the hollow breast—a convulsive shiver shakes the gaunt frame.

There is silence for a while.

A few moments Hester waits to give the tide of exaltation and delirium time to rise to its full height.

As she sees the sick man's eyes wander with a stare of vacant wonder round the brilliantly lighted room, she speaks.

She is kneeling by his side, behind him, so that he can hear but not see her.

Her heart beats almost to suffocation as she tries to steady the voice that trembles like a flickering light.

"Geoffrey Stirling—who robbed the bank? Who drove Gabriel Devenant to his death?"

For all answer the gaunt arms are raised high in wild appeal to Heaven, and an exceeding bitter cry for mercy breaks from the pallid lips. . . . . .

"Give me time, oh, God—give me time!—I do repent—I will confess—I will confess!"

Hester has won.

CHAPTER XXI.

FOILED!

After that one passionate utterance of despair and penitence had passed his white and quivering lips, Hester left her victim quiet for a while; not prompted thereto by any impulse of pity, but because she was absorbed in struggling with her own emotions; those wild steeds over which she had imagined herself possessed of the fullest control, but which showed signs of being stronger than her will.

It is one thing to suspect a thing, or even to be morally convinced of a thing; it is another thing to hear it put into words; to see—not "in a glass, darkly," but to stand face to face with a fact that has taken actual form and shape.

All through the long years Hester had identified Geoffrey Stirling with the man who robbed the bank and built up his own fortune on the ruin of others; she had not only suspected—she had known.

And yet the sound of the sinner's confession had torn her heart as a knife might rip up an old wound, and set it bleeding afresh.

Hester still knelt by the bed, from which the curtain was strained tightly back. Geoffrey Stirling could not see her; but he heard the sound of her deep long-drawn breathing, and moaned uneasily in his drugged lethargy.

Her head was bowed: her hands clasped above it.

It has been said that, by long-nursed resentment, her mental vision had become disturbed, and her own share in her husband's death obliterated. Now the scene of that death came before her in vivid and bitter reality—the white face rising through the dark water, the veil of ripples parting to let it pass—to let the sightless eyes stare mutely up to heaven as though imploring pity and vengeance; the drip, drip of the water trickling from the long hair, as the sodden head lay against her breast; the deadly chill of the dead hand against the warmth of her own bosom.

All these came back to her, hounding her on to keener thoughts of retribution.

Was not Gabriel dead? Was not his murderer living, successful, honoured?

Yes; and he should live too—live to suffer, to meet disgrace and shame; to pay the cost of his black and hellish crime.

The squire was not so ill as people thought. Dr. Turtle was a fool; other people were fools. It could not be that, after all, this man should escape through the gate of death from the consequences of his sin and treachery—it could not be!

So highly wrought were Hester Devenant's nerves that she seemed to herself but as the instrument of a higher retribution; but as the mouth-piece of many sufferers from a great wrong.

Round about the gaunt, sinewy wrists that showed white and wasted above the fur coverlet, she saw, in her fevered imagination, shining rings of steel; the skull-like attenuated head of the sick man presented itself to her mind's eye still more skull-like, still more attenuated, because shorn of its grey shadowy tresses.

A felon, in a felon's prison garb—thus might her eyes yet gloat over Geoffrey Stirling.

This vision was, however, one for the future. The present claimed her energies. The bitter chalice that her hand held to the lips of her enemy must be drained to the dregs, not merely sipped.

She peers at the face lying back upon the pillows.

The fever-spot still burns beneath each glazed and blood-shot eye; the parched lips move, though they give forth no audible sound.

The brain is still working—still excited rather than numbed by the strong narcotic.

Hester slips her arms beneath the pillows, raising them gently, until the squire is raised with them, almost into an upright posture.

Then she gently moves and even shakes the helpless hands, first one and then its fellow.

Again the eyes open and stare round the lightsome room.

"What"—moans the sufferer fretfully, "no rest, no rest?"

"What rest should there be for such as you?" says the

accusing voice at his side, the voice that he takes for that of his own accusing conscience.

"True, true," he mutters, in a patient acquiescence that is not without pathos; "but I have gone over the ground so often, must I traverse all the weary way again?"

"Every step of it."

He turns his head wearily from side to side, as one may see a dumb animal do, under terrible torture.

Hester waits a while until this piteous movement and protest cease.

Then, crouching far back against the wall that is bared by the uplifting of the braced-back curtain, she puts an initial question:

"Was the crime—the robbery—planned and carried out by you alone?"

"By me alone." Then, with a characteristic trick of irritability he adds: "Who the devil do you suppose I should ask to help me?"

"And you did it—that night?"

"No, no—I began it by little and little. He was going blind, you know; he was easily hoodwinked, and I cooked the ledgers. I was most afraid of poor old Anthony; but, if he was puzzled at any time, he only thought his own old brain was failing him. I tell you he came to me trembling, shaking from head to foot, begged me to dismiss him, and to get a younger man in his place Poor old Anthony! But I have made it up to him—I have made it up to him."

Like clockwork wound up to go only for a certain time, the squire's energy and consciousness were apt to sink suddenly into lethargy until freshly aroused.

The next question Hester put to him had to be repeated twice over, had to be spoken close to his ear, before it pierced into the confused and tortured brain.

"You used the money—other people's money—for your own purposes?"

"Yes; I took a little—a very little at first. I speculated with it—it doubled itself—trebled itself in my hands. I found myself with quite a hoard—and it was all for Ralph."

"Of course—all for Ralph."

"Who else should it be for? I had no ambition for myself . . . it was all for him—all for him."

Then broken images from a horrible past came up before the troubled mind, and, for a time, Hester could not catch the clue to the mutterings of the restless lips.

"You have a pretty skill, boy. 'Tis marvellous well done. Now, Ralph, say a bonnie 'thank you.' 'Tis neatly carved in truth—and good of you to spend so much time on my boy's amusement. He is not ungrateful—are you, sweetheart? I am sorry—very sorry—to see you suffer—try a remedy I know of."

In a flash Hester remembers Davie's evidence at the time of the robbery. She holds the clue now; she holds it close and fast.

"You drugged the boy Davie?"

"Ay, he slept soundly, and no fear, that night. I tell you I turned my lantern on his face as he lay, and he never stirred an eyelash."

"But that must have been in the bank?"

"Yes; in the bank. As for Gaylad—down, Gaylad, down! See how quiet he lies; his eyes, fond and faithful, are looking up to mine. He follows me with them as I move noiselessly about. Tut! how the door of that safe creaks. This key, too, it turns uneasily. Anthony should have seen to this better; it should have been oiled; but he grows old—he grows old. I must not be hard on his shortcomings."

"But the outer doors—how have you opened the outer doors of the bank?" says Hester, straining her hair off her brow with her hands; white even to the lips with eagerness; drawing her breath hard in the effort to keep herself in hand.

"How does anybody open doors in the dead of the night, when they don't want to wake a sleeping world? With keys to be sure—duplicate keys, made in Paris months before—made cunningly, mind you, from casts that I had taken, keys that opened the door into Church Lane. It was seldom used. It had an old rusty bolt, but I had looked to that . . . . O, I was wary over it all, I can tell you. Some one said that he who robbed the bank was clever as the Father of Lies himself. They said true—true—true."

His whole frame shook with a low chuckle that was enough to curdle one's blood to hear. But Hester was conscious of no fear. She was impatient—nothing more.

She wanted to hear the rest of the story. Each moment she feared that the narcotic might begin to daze and numb in spite of all her efforts, and the tale be left unfinished.

"Why did you pitch upon that night of all others?"

"I dared not wait any longer, the dividends were becoming due—the whole thing would out then. The money was gone, I tell you—good solid gold drained away little by little, like wine, rich and mellow, from a leaking cask. Besides Cuthbert Deane was away, and—I was glad. He is a hard man to meet when you have a load on your heart. Many a time I've longed to tell him all the story. I would have done it too—but for Ralph—but for my boy . . . "

"But, if you had not seen Davie that night, if you had had no chance to drug him (the keys of the safe were in the desk in his room), if he had awakened, what would you have done?"

"Killed him."

The long sinewy hands link and intertwine themselves together in a grisly tension, strangling an imaginary spy.

Then comes a sudden change. The mouth works and trembles, a heavy sigh heaves and rends the hollow breast.

"Poor boy—poor faithful Davie! he would not have known me for his master, though; he would not have known whose hand was crushing out his life—thank God for that!"

"He would not have known you for Geoffrey Stirling, you were too well disguised . . . ." Hester hisses the words through her teeth; she clenches her hand as she utters them; for her they bear a terrible significance,

'I should think you must be the devil, since you know so much about it?" says Geoffrey Stirling, for the first time straining round towards where the voice comes from, and clutching at the coverlet to help himself. But the effort exhausts him. He falls back heavily upon his pillow, and lies staring blankly at the shimmering candles reflected in the mirror that faces the foot of the bed. "Are they stars?" he said, pointing to them—"God's eyes that watch—watch—all night long?"

"Did the stars seem like the eyes of God to you that night?"

"Yes, yes," he mutters, putting his hand to his brow as if

to clear away the tangle of shifting thoughts and memories that hold him in its horrible meshes. "Yes, and every leaf a listening ear ——"

"Still, the long waggoner's frock, the red beard and heavy false locks were a safe enough blind—eh?"

"True; but the eyes up above could see through that; they pierced to my heart—to my heart, I tell you."

"You had burnt the ledgers?"

"Yes, leaf by leaf. It would not have done to make a great blaze, you know—too much smoke, too much smoke. Even as it was, some fool saw it. When all honest men ought to have been in their beds, he chose to be wandering about spying out what he could see——"

"He saw you returning home, did he not?"

"Yes, but that didn't matter; how should it? He wasn't like the eyes that watched from above. He was a fool, as I said before. I stood aside to let him pass. I was always an advocate for the working classes showing proper respect to their betters, always—anyone will tell you that——"

"Had you burnt the notes as well as the ledgers?"

"Why not? What good were they—eh? Besides, a common burglar would have taken them—he would not have known, as I did, that they were only so much worthless paper. Phew! how they curled up and crackled as they burnt! They stuck to my fingers like living things."

"Some one else saw you that night, besides the fool who ought to have been in his bed, and—wasn't?"

"Another fool—eh?"

"No; one whom men called a madman—Gabriel Devenant."

"He is dead, I tell you—I saw her sew his shroud."

A restless fear comes into Geoffrey Stirling's face as he speaks: the sweat beads upon his hollow temples.

"No," he says with feverish eagerness, putting out his hand as though to push away some unwelcome suggestion; "no, I will not see him . . . I have been ill . . . Let me go!"

"Gabriel was fond of wandering about in the night-time," went on Hester's voice with pitiless distinctness; "he saw you that night, he followed you home. He suspected you to

be the sinner you are. I tell you he cursed you as he went to his death——"

"I don't believe it," said Geoffrey sharply, with all his old abruptness of speech; "he was a vague dreamer. He hadn't it in him to divine a thing like that. Anyhow, what does it matter, he's dead—dead and gone to dust long enough ago; who cares what he fancied in that mad brain of his? I dream of him sometimes. His eyes follow me—they are mad—they glare. I see them now. . . Come here, whoever you are, stand between them and me. You need not be afraid. I tell you the man is dead—dead—dead!"

He cowered down, covering his eyes with a shaking hand to hide them from the glare of those others.

"He died by your hand, Geoffrey Stirling—he died by your hand as truly as though you plunged a knife into his heart! By you his wife was made a widow, and his child fatherless."

Hester's words now came pantingly; nor was the fevered flush on the sick man's cheek deeper than that which stained her own.

"You think so, do you?" said the squire, with one of his quick transitions of mood, casting aside fear and speaking mockingly; "well, well, anyway, since he took to the harbouring of foolish fancies, he's better out of the way. A madman's fancies, I tell you, nothing more. Phew! the people would have been ready to tear him in pieces, they would have jeered at him, hustled him away—God knows what they wouldn't have done to him, if he had breathed a word against—Geoffrey Stirling!"

He had forgotten his confession, his remorse, his penitence.

The drug he had swallowed was beginning to assert its specific powers, only the more powerfully for enforced delay.

In a little while he would drift away into a land of slumber, where Hester's will could no longer touch or stir him.

She recognised this in the altered tone of his voice, and the dull glare of his eyes. She saw the fevered flush beginning to fade from his cheek as the roseate tints fade from the evening sky when the sun goes down.

The night, the quiet night of sleep, was at hand—the night in which none can work.

At once Hester dropped the rôle of the accuser, and slipped into that of the skilled nurse.

She placed the sick man more easily upon his pillow, seized the chance of the consciousness that yet remained to him to induce him—not without much tact and gentle persuasion—to take a cup of strong soup and brandy, and then she sat herself down by the fire to cast up her gains.

Then, the crucial test on which she had brought all her strength of nerve and power of will to bear over, Geoffrey Stirling's physical well-being asserted itself in her eyes as a precious thing.

He must not slip through her fingers by passing under the dread, dark portal of Death. She had played for high stakes to-night, and she had won. The story of the bank robbery was hers. Here and there blanks in the tale could be filled in with knowledge gained during the patient waiting and watching of the long years that were past; with items that fitted into the narrative, as told by the chief actor in it, as perfectly as the bits into a child's puzzle-map.

Truly the "mission" undertaken while she left little Hilda to the care of old M. Lemaire had not been undertaken in vain. The flash of intuition that came to her as she caught the gesture of threatening and despair with which Gabriel—her husband—fled from the White House garden on that fatal night, had not been an *ignis fatuus* leading on to bogs and morasses of folly and confusion. It had been rather a light from heaven, a ray to guide her to the haven of revenge where she would be.

Were not other clues which she held in her strong determined hand lines that could not fail her? Was not the day of vengeance near at hand?

Such were the thoughts that crowded through her mind as she sat by the fire in the stillest hour of that still night, whose quiet was broken only by the deep regular breathing of the sleeping man extended on the bed.

Once Hester rose and stole on tip-toe to look at her helpless enemy.

So may the treacherous wife of Heber the Kenite have looked at Sisera as he slept, gently putting aside the locks

from his temples to make sure of the spot where the cruel nail should enter.

No nail or hammer had Hester in her strong white hand. Her vengeance took a different form and shape, for, as she bent above him, once more the vision of Geoffrey Stirling with gyves upon his wrists, with shorn head, and shameful felon's dress, came up before her mind, lighting her eyes with a cruel joy, parting the grand lines of her lips in a triumphant smile.

It has been said of Hester that the lust of vengeance blinded her to all her own shortcomings in the past. And now, no memory of her own sins against her husband jarred upon her sense of triumph—no memory of the scourge of bitter words laid on shrinking shoulders with pitiless severity visited her to-night.

She, a blameless, cruelly injured woman, was the avenger of a murdered man—that man the one thing on earth she had ever loved with passionate *abandon;* that man the lover of her youth, the husband of her womanhood; the man whose eyes had held hers with a spell of tender beseeching in the dear dead days; the man whose lips meeting her own in a first, fond kiss, while all the gloaming around them was sweet with the fresh-cut hay, had taught her that the loveliest thing in life is love.

She never remembered Gabriel, when most she thirsted to avenge him, as the husband whom her jealous fancies had flouted and driven from her side—the man whose life and talents she had striven to grasp and crush. No! He always came before her memory as the dark-eyed lover of those halcyon days, when the light of his love was to her heart as the sunshine to the flowers; when the touch of his hand on hers made all the pulses of her blood beat with ineffable delight. Those days of half-uncertain bliss were the only days of tenderness and content her stormy nature had ever known. The strong element of selfishness in Hester's nature had naturally prevented her from finding that exquisite happiness in motherhood that it is given to some women to find; since mother-love, to be true and satisfying, must know no dross of self. Hilda had, hitherto, stood for but little in her mother's life; had appeared to her more in the guise of a creature under authority to be

bent to her will, than of a gift, God-given, to be loved and cherished,

Bending over the fire, absorbed in thoughts of a day to come—a day in which all her greed of vengeance should be satisfied as some glutton at a lordly feast, she had not bethought her to put out the lights that still flooded the room with a soft radiance. She had forgotten that they burned on, shimmering on the bed and its occupant, lighting up her own set face into a statuesque, transparent beauty.

But as she turned, swayed by some passing thought, towards the sick man's couch, she met his eyes, widely open, staring, and yet—asleep.

A cold shudder passed through her as she met that stony, sightless gaze.

It was too like the ghastly unblinking stare of dead eyes that had looked up to the sky above, as a dead man's head rested on her breast, and the water dripped down on to the drowned flowers from his heavy locks, not to fill her soul, brave woman as she was, with craven terror.

Meeting those eyes she knew they saw her not; meeting them she knew they watched a world invisible save to themselves alone.

Another moment, and with a long shuddering groan Geoffrey Stirling has risen from his bed, and is standing grasping the foot-rail, a ghastly, awful figure, half of life, half of death—wholly of neither.

It is Hester who has set in motion the wheels of this horrible automaton; this thing that seems to move by clock-work without will of its own, and simply because a power beyond itself compels it.

The tortured brain, exalted to a pitch that savours of madness, even in sleep, exerts its autocratic power over the poor feeble body.

Colourless as that of the dead is the face of the sleep-walker; his lips are livid and twitch convulsively, muttering words she cannot follow.

Hester seems spell-bound. She clings with both hands to the arm of her chair, and stares and stares at the slowly mechanically moving figure that she dare not molest.

He has crossed the room, turning his head restlessly this

way and that, as one who is watched, who fears pursuit. Yet is every movement not that of a sentient being, but of a thing governed by some ghastly power outside itself. Now he kneels by the old brass-bound coffer, and Hester, in her eagerness and terror, has risen, and bends forward, yet never quits her hold upon the chair.

"Once more—once more—the old weary way," she hears him murmur, with a sigh that almost rends his breast. Then, as he turns his head, as one who watches stealthily, and those filmy eyes—unseeing—yet horrible—meet her own, she covers her face with her hands, and cowers back in her chair.

The hands of the figure move softly and stealthily over the carved lid. There is a click, and the coffer-lid falls back.

Hester looks up.

Within lies, crumpled up, something in dead white folds, while seen against it is what looks like a gory patch.

With the same horrible mechanical precision as has marked all his former movements, Geoffrey Stirling raises his hands towards the lappets of the flowered dressing-gown he wears, evidently with intent to divest himself of it. Then he turns his head towards the further door, and so remains motionless as some lifeless image. The portal that Hester imagined to be secured so safely has opened slowly, and some one stands in the doorway.

The squire's hands drop to his sides, and with a terrible wailing cry he struggles to his feet, and so stands—with arms outstretched and head thrown back.

In a moment Davie's arms clasp him round. As easily as a mother lifts her babe he has borne his master to the bed; laid him tenderly down, and is bending over him.

"Brandy—for God's sake—quick!" he cries; "he is dying!"

He cannot stir himself, for Geoffrey's arms cling wildly about hir., striving to pull him down, down, closer, closer to him.

"What is all this? What has happened? Was he walking in his sleep? Not undressed, too, and it is nearly morning!" says Davie, as he forces the brandy between his master's pallid lips; "you must have fallen into a doze!" he continues sternly.

Hester herself, almost as pale as the sick man, acquiesces in this supposition, striving meanwhile to lend a hand in restoring the squire to life and consciousness.

"My God! is he dead?" cries Davie, his voice rising almost to a scream.

At last Geoffrey Stirling hears that pitiful cry. He tries to raise his head, tries to smile—at last he speaks.

"I am glad you are come, Davie. . . . . They said you had gone on a long journey. . . . . Do not leave me again."

"What is it, master? Oh, master, what ails you?" says Davie, sobbing like a woman.

As for Hester, she pulls the curtain of the bed into its place and shrinks behind it. All that Davie can see of her is one hand that clutches the outer folds of the drapery as the hand of a drowning man might clutch a rope.

"I have had terrible dreams to-night," continues Geoffrey Stirling, never once letting go his hold of Davie—never once taking his eyes from the dear, true face bending above him—his eyes that are no longer glassy and unseeing, but though strangely dim and sunken, are eyes that are sane and see what they look upon—"terrible dreams, Davie. I have been going over the same old weary road that I have traversed so often; but I think, I fancy—I have passed along it . . . . for the last time. Listen to me, Davie. Can you hear every word I say? Are you sure?"

"Every word. Master—master!" answers Davie; but cannot see his master's face for tears.

Geoffrey Stirling stretches himself upwards and backwards in Davie's arms.

"It has been a weary load to carry all these years—but now—I have confessed—I do repent. Pray that God give me peace."

Bewildered, amazed, thinking his master still raves in delirium, Davie is tongue-tied, tear-blinded.

And still all he sees of Hester is the white hand clutching the curtain till the curtain shakes and trembles.

"It has been dragging me down, down to hell—the gold, Davie, the gold that was not mine to take! Night by night, as I walked all the weary way, the devil piled it on my shoulders. Gold, Davie, gold—heavy as lead—I could not see it . . . but I could feel it. . . . I groaned—staggering

beneath it; the tears and crying of the widow and the orphan have been tearing at my heart, maddening me, driving me to despair—but now I do confess, I do repent. . . . . Pray God to give me peace. . . . ."

"I am praying, master—I am praying with my whole heart."

"Hush! do you not hear the singers out in the night? Can you hear the words they sing?

Pardon to man's repentant sigh,
For Christ shall die . . . ."

"Lord remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."

Frantic with fear, yet knowing not what to do, Davie lifted the poor drooping head on to his breast, raising the worn figure higher and higher, as breath seemed to fail and life to ebb.

As he did so he saw a smile on the pale lips.

The eyes that had been closed a moment before opened widely, full of the bright sweetness that had once won the hearts of men.

"They are singing still," he said. "Davie, only hear them! Tell Ralph I was sorry not to wait until he came, but that I couldn't stay. Tell him that it wasn't want of love made me send him away so often . . . . but that I feared him. . . . . I feared his innocent eyes—and his loving ways. . . . . Tell him I craved for him as the thirsty crave for water. . . . . Tell him I have confessed . . . . tell him to make——"

That message was never finished, for death cut the words in twain.

The jaw dropped, the eyes became fixed and sightless. The man who had been so much loved—the man who had sinned so terribly—had carried his load of sin to the feet of God.

When Davie moved away from the bed where he had laid what once was Geoffrey Stirling tenderly and reverently down, he saw Hester Devenant standing by the open coffer.

As he came to her side she bent over it, raised the heavy white folds that filled it, and then—in silence—looked at him

"What does this mean?" gasped Davie, a terrible look of fear in his eyes, his heart beginning to beat heavily in his breast.

"It means that Geoffrey Stirling was the ghost that walked in the shrubbery—it means that Geoffrey Stirling was the man who robbed the bank—the man who—murdered—my husband. It means that I—Hester Devenant—am—foiled!"

As she breaks into wild hysteric laughter, Davie falls back from her as from something loathsome and terrible.

BOOK THIRD.

CHAPTER XXII.

MRS. CALLENDER ENTERTAINS.

THE date was three months later than that of the last episode in our story; the hour, five of the afternoon; the place, Amos Callender's neat abode in Becklington market-place.

Spring was in its fairest, freshest days; those days when garlands of faint and tender hue seem flung from branch to branch and tree to tree with careless hand, and all the waking world is immature, but unspeakably lovely in its immaturity.

Mrs. Callender's jonquils, standing all a-row in the window, determined not to be behind the rest of the world, had dressed themselves in pale green smocks, with nodding hoods of white and gold, while their sweet breath made all the low-raftered parlour fragrant.

Mrs. Callender's tea-table, too, presented a spring-like festivity of aspect. Salad, green and fresh (not omitting the young and delicate onion; shrimps, rosy-hued, transparent of shell, emulating in size their cousins the prawns; and a cold round of beef that would have made the table groan if the article of furniture in question had not happened to be a sort of magnified oak settle that hadn't a groan in it.

The tea-table being thus dressed *en fête*, it was only to be expected that Mrs. Callender should follow suit.

Which she had done; having so much in common with the jonquils that yellow ribbons fluttered in her cap.

The worthy tanner, too, presented a shiny and scarified appearance, that, with him, meant sundry severe toilette processes.

He was pacing restlessly up and down the pleasant parlour; now and then catching up a shrimp by the tail, deftly swinging it (in its entirety) into his mouth, and crunching it manfully.

He was also looking at Bess. No unpleasant object of contemplation either, for time has dealt gently with that good and faithful wife, whom we first encountered in the character of comforter and consoler to her husband in the day of calamity. Her hair is grey, and she is more buxom as to figure than of yore; but other change is there none.

Bess is still the same bright hopeful woman as ever; she might be own sister to Farmer Dale's Nancy for matter of that.

"Don't go to eat the s'rimps wi'out shellin' 'em to-night, Amos," she said, looking up from her knitting in a somewhat cajoling fashion; Mrs. Dale's apt to be a bit pertickler, and it isn't counted genteel to eat s'rimps whole, that way."

"Well," said Amos, glad of a grievance or the semblance of one to pass the time away, "'tisna reasonable, danged if it is, to fiddle-faddle with one's victuals like that. I ask you now, lass, when you've took off a shrimp's head and his tail, —where is he?"

Bessie was obliged to allow that his pink stripped body made but a poor show.

"Just so; a man like me don't know he's there, and is ready to think he's more trouble than he's worth. I'd be same as the big elephant I see'd at t' Zoological Gardens last time I wur up i' Lunnun—time as I missed t' ghost, thee knows, lass. Well, the great beast opened his mouth wide as ever it could go, and the folks pitched nuts in. It stands to sense he couldn't tell if they wur theer or no' but he giv' a kind of a swaller, and smirked a bit (being pleased to be took so much notice on), though I reckon he didn't get much satisfaction out of the business, for all he made such a show."

Bessie had dropped her knitting, hands and all, on her lap,

and was looking, with wide appreciative eyes, at her lord and master.

"Ay, but, Amos," she said, with a sigh of admiration, "yo've seen a deal o' life!"

"Well, well," replied the travelled one, "I reckon I've gone about wi' my eyes open; that's the difference between me and some folks."

Further conversation was put a stop to by the arrival of the long expected guests—Farmer Dale and Mrs. Dale—the latter with her best cap tied up in a spotted handkerchief for safety; Jeremy Bindwhistle, with a wonderful "bouquet" in his Sunday coat, and bearing an excuse from "the missus," who was "a bit out o' sorts"; and Softie, also in a state of forlorn temporary bachelorhood, his better-half having "a crook in her temper," as the farmer slily suggested to Bessie, though poor Softie called it a "cold th' yed."

"Well, here we are," said Amos, rubbing his hands, and much relieved by the arrival of his guests. He was a man of impatient nature, as may have already been gathered, and hated waiting. It was said that, when waiting for Bess to come downstairs the morning they two were wed, he danced a double-shuffle in the passage, because she took so long to "get her finery on."

But he was quite content now, as he took his seat at the bottom of the table, and looked radiantly round his own hospitable board.

Stay though, one guest was lacking.

"Why wherever's Jake got to?" he cried, a blank look coming over his jolly face; "the lazy laggard!"

"He's mostly as spry as a parched pea in a bladder, is Jake," said Jeremy, giving a delicate touch to his posy.

"So he is," assented the host; "but we conna wait for 'un' —count of their bein' marrow-bones."

"The soul of a marrow-bone is not havin' his insoide boiled away, and bein' served up pipin' hot," said Jeremy, with the air of a connoisseur.

So the marrow-bones were had in, the tea was poured out, and, as Amos presently observed, "things set a-goin'."

Softie had plastered his hair down with a liberal allowance of water until it looked like a badly-made wig, and put on a green tie, which gave him a more than usually cadaverous

appearance; but he seemed to be enjoying himself in a silent sort of way of his own; a kind of crushed and mortified rejoicing, that was his highest manifestation of content.

He even volunteered a remark without anybody leading up to it.

"Happen Jake's lingered a bit at The Safe Retreat. They *do* say as he's spakin' up to Widow Green."

Now one Green, the proprietor of the hostelry in question, had departed this life a year back, and his buxom relict was the cynosure of many eyes,—she, or her cosy well-to-do inn —or both—as the case might be.

"She'd never tak 'oop wi' such a little chap as Jake!" said Mrs. Dale, with a glance of pride at her own husband's ample proportions.

"She moight do wur," put in Jeremy; "Jake's as good a hearted chap as stands i' Becklington, and it 'ud be a foine settlement i' loife for him, mind you, in the evenin' of his days."

"Happen his legs moight stand i' his way," said Softie suggestively.

"Maybe," replied the farmer; "but a woman o' sense would overlook such trifles if so be as a man had a good head-piece on his shoulders and could manage the customers —more especially of a Saturday night, when they're apt to be boistersome."

"Aye, aye, they're a handful for a lone woman and no mistake," quoth Nance, shaking her head and looking mighty grave as she tried to picture herself struggling with the farm, and no master to look to things.

What more might have been said on the interesting topic of Jake's amorous aspirations will never be known, for at that moment the individual in question was seen crossing the market-place, and that with such a strange look of ineffable dignity and importance about him as made his spindle-shanks appear equal to the very stoutest supporters ever relied upon by man.

"Whatever's ado?" said Bess, keeping the tea-pot in mid air in her amaze.

"Hold thy peace, lass," said her husband. "Jake likes to tell his tale his own way."

"Sure as sure he's goin' to tell us as the widdy's to take him, legs and all, for better for wuss!" ejaculated the farmer in a husky snort that was meant for a whisper.

If so spare a man as Jake could be said to swell with importance, then was Jake swelling, even as the ambitious frog of old.

Was he not the great pioneer of news in Becklington? Did he not love to hold his audience on tenter-hooks? Was he going to let them off now? Not he.

If he'd been going to set the hymn tune at a chapel meeting he couldn't have looked more solemn, or bidden Mrs. Callender good-evening in a more sepulchral manner.

"If it's marriage, he takes it wuss than a funeral," thought sonsie Nance, tossing her handsome head in scorn.

"Yo're late, Jake," said Amos, tipping a wink to the company in general to show that he was humouring the old gossip to the top of his bent.

"Aye," said Jake, speaking very low down in himself, leaning back in his chair, and staring abstractedly at the shrimps, not as shrimps, but because they chanced to come in his line of vision; "aye, I am—wi' cause too."

Bess had set the tea-pot down with a jerk, and was staring hard at Jake. Indeed everyone was staring at Jake. Most of the company had their mouths open as well as their eyes.

"I've come down from the Vicarage, that's what kep' me," said the oracle at last, mystical in his utterances as an oracle should be.

"Now don't," cried Bess, "go for to tell me as anything's gone wrong with the vicar's lady, Jake, for I couldn't abear it—nor yet wi' the vicar! We've had death and sorrow enoo among us o' late, the dear Lord knows!"

"'Tisn't sorrow," said Jake, taking his eyes from the shrimps, and fixing Softie instead; "its confugion—its runnins to and fro—its tears o' joy a-streamin' down that dear lady's face—its the vicar stammerin' and starin' loike ony fule, and Dr. Turtle takin snuff enoo to blow his'sen up—that's what it is."

"Tell yer tale yer own way, lad," paid the farmer, scratching the nape of his neck in a sort of paroxysm of restrained impatience; "thou'll go thy ain gate, let who may gi' thee

a hitch beboind. Tak' thee time wi't—tak' thee time wi't, lad!"

The present was a moment of supreme happiness to Jake. Was not every living soul present hanging on his words? Was he not the centre of general attraction—the one spot upon which every eye was fixed? And, besides, had he not a secret store of delight in that he knew what a very big cat he was hoarding in his bag, and with what a bounce it would leap into the centre of the crowd when the supreme moment should arrive?

Jake licked his lips, as one who tastes a morsel rich and rare, before he spoke again.

"What would you say to Maister Ralph bein' aloive and well, and comin' whoam for to enjoy his own again?"

The effect was even beyond his expectations: it was simply stupendous.

Such a scraping of chair-legs against the floor, as seats were pushed back! Such long-drawn sighs and gasps of astonishment!

Jake looked calmly from one to the other, He wished to taste his own triumph in all its sweetness.

The farmer was the first to recover himself.

"What would oi say?" he cried, bringing his fist down on the table till all the dishes rang again; "I'd say as t' news wur t' best as ever I heerd wi' the ears as God A'mighty gev' me; I'd say as t' day as brings the lad safe whoam 'ull need no sun for to mak' it broight; I'd say t' look o' his bonnie face would be t' best o' all the sights under heaven. Bless us all! Why, Nancy—what's amiss?"

Farmer Dale, who sat next his wife, now began to pat her on the back, as if he thought she were choking; for the tears were welling up in her bright eyes, and she was so upset that she began to wipe them away with her new cap strings.

"Here's a soft-hearted one for you!" cried the farmer (speaking rather gulpingly himself though), at which Amos put in a word for the women-kind.

"Leave the missuses alone," said he; "my lass is as bad as yourn."

And, true enough, there was Bess ready to choke in her tea.

"It's not the lad I'm fit to cry over," said Nancy, catch-

ing her breath: "it's the thought of the poor father as comes over me—him as died hungry for a word and a look of the boy he loved so dear—him as conna be here to see the boy come whoam. My sakes, farmer! but don't yo' mind last time t' squire came up to t' farm, how he tould us about the Christmas they were goin' to keep, wi' Maister Ralph back, and never a hungry soul to be in Becklington that day? Don't yo' mind how he praised my syllabub, and crushed the big heads o' lavender in his hand as he walked by my side, and said how sweet they smelled, and how was it no one grew such lavender as me? Do yo' mind the gentle way of him, and the lovin' look of him when he spoke o' the boy as must come to a cold hearth, as the sayin' goes, and an empty cheer?"

"But is it true, Jake—is it true?" cried Bess, leaning forward so eagerly that she upset one of her own best china teacups. "It seems too like a story-book, or a fairy-tale, or summut o' that mak' o' fables."

"It's true as Gospel is," replied Jake, "and I conna say no stronger words than them. Maister Ralph he wur i' an open boat two nights and two days, and two po'r sailors along wi' him. Second night, one po'r chap he died, and they pitched him overboard. Then they drifted—their fingers bein' that numb wi' cold they couldn't have handled an oar if there'd bin one—which there weren't. Well, they giv' themsel's up for lost—Maister Ralph and that other. It wur that dark they couldn't hardly see each other's faces: a' they could hear was the roarin' of the waves around them. Maister Ralph was gettin' dazed like, and sat there a' in a heap, as yo' may say, thinkin' of the poor gentleman as used to larn him a' his larnin', and wur drowned fust go off when t' big ship took to sinkin'; and then—all at once—there come a lurch, an' a bounce, an' a bump, and—why theer they wur!"

"Wheer's theer?" put in Softie, who had been one broad stare of amaze all through.

"Why, where should it be, numyed?" said Jake, with infinite and concentrated contempt; "on the desert island, of course; where else?"

"Same as Robinson Crusoe," suggested Jeremy Bindwhistle, who was a man of reading and research.

"It was a poor kind of a place, that island," continued Jake, taking no notice of this interpolation; "nothin' much more than a stoopid old rock, with a few pigeons and jelly-fish, and such-like, stuck about it here and there, and nothin' better than a kind of a cave for shelter; but they made shift to keep body and soul together, and kep' a bit of a flag flyin' all day long in hopes a ship moight pass that way and see 'em—which it did; but not till many a weary day and night had passed away, and them two misfortunate critturs weren't far off bein' skellingtons. I reckon you moight ha' pretty nigh seen through 'em if yo'd set 'em up on end betwixt yo' and t' loight," added Jake, determined to lose nothing in the way of detail.

"And when the ship come, and the sailors saw the little flag, where did they take Maister Ralph and that other?" asked Mrs. Dale, whose eyes were still bright, and whose motherly heart was swelling.

"To a far-off place," said Jake; "a place called Rio, as I'm told—which isn't much of a name, but maybe more of a place. Anyhow, it's where our vicar's off to, pretty quick too, I can tell yo'."

"Our vicar did yo' say?" said Jeremy, more and more astonished if that were possible; "is he goin' to fetch Maister Ralph home?"

"Aye, that is he," replied Jake; "for the lad is sorely sick——"

"Yo' said, 'aloive and well,'" objected Amos.

"That wur a figger," said Jake, "a parable, as yo' may say; meanin' as him as wur dead is now giv' back to us once more."

"And did Maister Ralph write to the vicar then?" said Bess, determined to know the ins and outs of the whole matter.

"That did he. He knew as t' squire and—God help the boy!—the mother too would ha' been told how the *Alladin* lay many a fathom deep, wi' her back broke an' all han's lost, and he thought as the vicar could best break to those poor hearts as their boy wur safe and sound—to use a figger again, mates—for joy's ofttimes as hard to meet face to face as sorrow, and that Maister Ralph well knew. So you see it's this way; there's none left to break it to, and all

the house shut up an' silent. I don't mean to say as there isn't Mrs. Prettyman—or as she won't take on awful, and have the highstrikes wuss than common—I said so to Maister Deane as he were settin' off wi' the boy's letter in his pocket to your place, Jeremy; and 'I'll go too,' says Mistress Deane, a clutchin' of the vicar's arm, 'Nurse Prettyman will be glad to hug some one,' says she, a-smilin' and a cryin' both in one; 'an' she can't hug you, Cuthbert,' says she."

"It's like the sweet ways on her, danged if it isna!" said the farmer; "there never her ekal onywheers, says I!"

"Amen to that," cried Jake, "and here's wishin' there wur more like her."

Then his reflections took a new turn.

"Whatever 'ull the boy Davie say to the turn things has took?"

"Yo' may say that," said Jeremy, "and him so far away too, wi' no one to unbuzzum himsel' to! It were reet enoo' for t' lad to go to see after all the sugar-canes and such-like that grow like so much corn, as I hear, out in Barbadoes, and mak' a fine harvest if reetly fettled, but it's hard on him to be away when such junketings are goin' on, put it how you will. Then there's Mrs. Devenant—what will she say to the turn matters has took? Yo' may say she's been pretty nigh off her head ever sin' t' squire died so suddint like, and her beside him. I've never felt as I reetly got to t' bottom o' that business; happen I never shall; but I've a mind to think as she fell a-dozin,' an' t' squire were left to do his deein' all alone—anyway she and Davie had a bad fallin' out of it—ay, that had they—and there were more fallin's out beside, for I met the girl Hilda, wi' her eyes as red as a ferret's, comin' out of the meadows. Davie wur walkin' beside her, and speakin' fast-like, his face wur pale an 'wan like and he wur twistin' his hands together, loike as if he wur tryin' to strangle his own heart. He never went a-nigh t' White House afore he sailed for that far-off place, and it just fair gloppens me, take it at what end yo' will."

"What does Mrs. Prettyman say about it?" asked Mrs. Dale, who was a shrewd as well as kindly woman.

"She says nowt—know what she may—but she carries a

load on her mind, or her face belies her. I reckon she conna forgive hersel' for that there quinsy that kep' her from her master's bedside the night he died."

"But Davie was with him at the last?" said Bess, awestruck at the tone the conversation had taken.

"Yes; he helt him i' his arms as the last breath lef' his body. But he wur nigh gone when Davie reached him. Davie wur mad-like all the next day, and Mrs. Devenant vanished like a shadder same night as t' Squire died."

"God bless us all! What days we live in!" said Softie at this juncture.

"That do we," said Jeremy, pleased with his late efforts in oratory, and glad to hear the sound of his own voice again; "the things as has happened i' this here town the last few weeks be enough to make a man feel as tho' he wur in a merry-go-round, and forced to howd on hard to keep his yed. It's here to-day and gone to-morrow."

"Nay," said Jake, "it's gone to-day and here to-morrow wi' Maister Ralph, and my heart's that light within me, I'm fit to break out i' praise."

"Doant 'ee, Jake, doant 'ee!" put in Softie, in a wheedling manner all his own; "tak' some thought for Mistress Callender's rafters—do 'ee now!"

"Ay, ay," said Amos, with a loud ringing laugh; "they've bin a bit shaky this while back. Have a care, neighbour, have a care."

"Fall to on t' victuals instead," said the good-natured farmer; "thee'st brought a bellyful o' news along wi' thee to stay thy stommick, lad, but t' news is a' out now, and it's toime t' victuals wur in."

Jake, profiting by this wise counsel, pulled his chair up to the table, and began his meal; but he only got on slowly, so hard did the women pelt him with questions.

"So the vicar's going across the seas to fetch Maister Ralph home?" said Jeremy meditatively, later on in the evening; "I'm glad the asters promise so well this year."

"I'm glad my crops look so well," rejoined the farmer. "'T young squoire's sure and sartain to come and see me and Nance there, afore he's bin a week in Becklington."

"Ay, he's father's own son," said they all.

So each built his or her castle; each made up his or her mind what to say in greeting to the wanderer on his return —what to say to the bright boy who had been mourned as dead, and was alive again. And each and all came to these tender resolves for nothing in the end.

For after many weeks of absence the long-expected vicar came back to Becklington—alone.

He looked worn and weary, as well he might, for his task had been a hard one.

Even to the dear life he loved so well—the woman who was one with him in thought and hope and purpose, Cuthbert Deane spoke but little of his first interview with Ralph Stirling.

"I shall never forget the boy's face when I told him his father was dead—never while I live."

That was what the vicar said to Alicia; and Alicia asked no questions.

She saw that the brave, true heart had been stirred to its deepest depths.

Ralph had refused to return to his desolate home.

"I could not bear it," he had said, turning away a white and stricken face from Cuthbert Deane's pitying gaze; "not yet—not yet."

The land whither the stranger-vessel had borne the castaways was rich and beautiful, and there Ralph elected to stay.

By Squire Geoffrey's will, Cuthbert Deane was Ralph's guardian and trustee.

"My worldly possessions cannot be in better hands," said the boy with a smile. "You can send me what money I want, and you and old Anthony can manage the rest."

"Is Ralph much changed?" said Alicia to her husband, come time after his return from Rio.

"All he has gone through has naturally made some change," said the Vicar. "He looks older—older than his years—and has grown in every way more marvellously like his father."

Time passed on.

Davie was busy winding up and trying to dispose of the estate in Barbadoes, since Ralph had expressed a wish to get rid of it. Jeremy was bringing the gardens and shrubberies

at Dale End to an exalted state of perfection. Nurse Prettyman was wearying to see her nursling. Old Anthony seemed to have taken a fresh lease of life since he had heard of Master Ralph's safety, and surely never did more faithful steward toil for an absent lord.

Mrs. Devenant was in bad health—so folks said. At all events, she was seldom seen abroad, and had never been at church since the squire died. Hilda was her constant attendant shadow. The girl's face was sweet as ever, but a great deal sadder; and some coldness or constraint seemed to have arisen between her and her friend the Vicar's wife.

Cuthbert Deane visited the White House; tried to win Hilda from her reserve, her mother from her moody silent ways. But even he, for once, failed. He had to give it up. And gradually it came to be said in Becklington that Hester Devenant was not quite in her right mind; and that Hilda, with a daughter's devotion and a mother's tenderness, watched over and tended her, keeping all others at arm's-length.

Two things were certain.

Davie never wrote to the woman who had once been his friend, and Hilda never spoke of Davie.

The next "event" in Becklington was the death of poor Softie, who was laid in a narrower bed than the ditch he once persisted in taking for his own, just when the first leaves began to fall.

Before the year was out, Softie's widow took to herself a second spouse.

"Bein' as she was used to scolding summat, she felt kinder lonesome till she took another mon to keep her hand in," said Jake, explaining the matter to some new comers at The Safe Retreat; "He wur a takin' kind of a chap wur this second wenture o' hers—wore his cap knowin' like, all to one side, and parted his yure extrodinary neat. Well, the widdy took him for better for wuss, and a lot o' the last—for he beat Softie's missus i' the fust week o' their wedded bliss—ay, that did he! and tould her as he'd do it agen if she did'nt keep a civil tongue in her yed. Has'na she just got l'imbersome sin' her second weddin' day—and dunna she just speak tender of him as she mithered to death wi' her naggin' ways! 'Jake,' says she, 'my 'art's

buried in his grave!' says she, and busts out cryin' like a choilt. She'd spake the poor felly fair enough if he could come back now—but it's too late for that. There's a mort o' things as cooms too late i' this world," added Jake with a tributary sigh to his old comrade's memory.

"Ay, ay, that's so," said Farmer Dale, "let us hope there's no such a word i' that which is to come."

These, and kindred items of discussion and comment, enlivened the Saturday nights at Widow Green's for a time. But at last the interest of these fell off; and then came a long, dull spell, during which nobody did anything remarkable, and the weather and crops formed the chief subjects of conversation with Jake and his fellows.

But in the early months of the third spring from that spring-day with which this chapter opened, Becklington was roused to wild excitement by the news that young Squire Ralph was coming home again.

And Jake was the first to know it, and the first to tell it!

CHAPTER XXIII.

A PEAL OF BELLS.

HAVE the birds and the bells gone mad this kingly day?

Ever since early morning the chimes of St. Mary's tower have been making merry, now ringing peal after peal, now all crashing together as though they had gone crazy with joy, and were tumbling pell-mell into one another. Above them is a perfectly cloudless dome of blue, that thing so rare in England, that, when it does gladden our eyes, we are all ready to turn sun-worshippers. Below, in the trees that stud the churchyard and fleck the meadows, the birds are holding high carnival.

A black-cap is swinging himself upside down on the branch of a cherry-tree white with blossom. He has been born and reared almost in the shadow of the grand old tower that is always dressed in green summer and winter.

and couldn't very well fall because the countless arms of the ivy clasp it so tightly—what cares he for the bells? He is not one bit afraid of them, bless you! and sings his own little twittering song in spite of them. To him they are only bigger birds than himself, with louder voices and a monster nest ever so high up among the ivy.

The chaffinch cries, "Sweet! sweet!" balancing himself delicately on a beech-bough that is thick with pale green, red-veined leaves. "Sweet! sweet!" he cries, greeting the new day with a tender flattery.

Spring is so rich in store of buds and tiny leaves but half unfolded, that she is like a mother glorying in the sight of many fair children.

The feathered banners of the ferns are unfolding; the white fluffy umbels of the mountain-ash make all the air beneath their flickering shadows fragrant.

The dykes gleam like silver in the sunshine, and from amid the tangle of greenery round about their treacherous edges the blue eyes of the speedwell begin to look forth, while the white stars of the stellaria gem the hedgerows, and the daisies are scattered broadcast everywhere.

So bright is the dawn of this fair day, that of its very brightness is born a soft amethyst-tinted haze, that floats among the groves of tapering masts in the harbour, and veils the coast that is set thick with wharves and store-houses for merchandise.

The vane upon the town-hall in the old market-place blinks and sparkles as blindingly as on that morning fourteen years ago when first we caught its gleaming; and swallows dip and fly, circling in a sea of blue with joyous piercing cry—as then.

Only—to-day is Sunday: there is a quiet hush upon the town of Becklington, and the grasping miller's windmill keeps it long arms still.

And St. Mary's bells, pealing and crashing, have it all their own way, flinging the echo of their jubilant voices far out across the sea, which where the veil of mist breaks shows like a blue-green garment, bright with a thousand jewels.

Becklington is looking its best and fairest. All its grand commercial activity is in abeyance. No teagle swings in the

sun-bright air; no monster crane lifts countless packages one by one from wharf to hold, and hold to wharf.

All the workaday world being thus restful as to hands, people have the more leisure to wag their tongues, and on every tongue is the story of the young heir, Ralph Stirling of Dale End, he whom men deemed dead, for whom women wept: he who, given back from the depths of the hungry sea, had come to claim his own, and to take up his abode in their midst.

A sudden spirit of religious fervour was making itself manifest in Becklington this glorious Sabbath morning. In truth, Cuthbert Deane would have had but little fault to find with the flock over which he was shepherd, if such zeal had been the rule, instead of the exception; if every man and woman who passed through the fair flowery meadows that day had been going thus eagerly to the sanctuary to praise and pray, instead of to gape and gaze at the young squire. But, while human nature exists, curiosity will ever be one of its strongest springs of action.

There was no manner of fear of any one being late for morning prayer on the present occasion. In fact the humbler portion of the congregation were scattered about St. Mary's churchyard, and hanging around the gateway, long before the clock pointed to the hour for service.

Amos Callender and his wife Bess—the latter in a bonnet of marvellous smartness, tied with excruciating tightness under the chin; Farmer Dale and Nancy, with stalwart sons of whom they did well to be proud; Jeremy Bindwhistle and his spouse, in great request by virtue of their position at the Dale; and—oh, wonder of wonders!—Jake, dressed as he might be supposed to appear when sunning himself in the smiles of Widow Green—Jake, for once a deserter from the chapel—Jake, "wi' his heart i' his mouth," as he explained to the farmer in an audible aside, and evidently foredoomed to distinguish himself in the hymn-singing by-and-by as a relief to what he called the "joy within"—all these, gravitating naturally towards each other by the force of habitual companionship, formed a group near the mighty yew-tree half-way up the churchyard.

"When you come to think on 't, Jonah's nothin' to set agen Maister Ralph this day," said Jake; "He wur but

kep' handy i' the whale's belly—which is, I reckon, a pleasant and comf rtable place compared to an open boat in a stormy sea, and never an oar to grapple wi'—while as for t' young squire—why, I tell yo' what it is: I feel loike one as is called upon to see one resurrected."

"I hope yon dratted ghost up at our place won't resurrect itsel', to greet t' young squoire, anyway," said Jeremy, with an uneasy glance at the graves with which he was surrounded.

"No fear, lad," replied the farmer stoutly. "Yon chap got tired o' walking long enoo' sin'. Whoy, he's never been ketched soight on sin' Squire Geoffrey died, thee knows."

"Are yo' sure as ever he *wur* ketched sight on?" put in Amos Callender. "Happen 'twas just a bit foo' ye all wur that time, and tuk a gatepost for a boggart."

The tanner's incredulity in the matter of the ghost was an old sore, and hot words might have been uttered, had not a carriage driven up quickly to the church gates. Eyes stared: tongues were silenced for the nonce.

Ralph was accompanied by Sir Denby and Lady Boscawen. Pretty Ethel had been married a year back, or she too doubtless would have been beside her old companion. My lady looked what Bess described as "upsetted-like." Her motherly heart was full. Her thoughts were with that other mother upon whose grave the sun was shining. Sir Denby betrayed an inclination to purse up his mouth for a whistle, and would have been glad to give vent to his feelings by slapping Ralph upon the back at intervals. This being impossible, he looked at once as happy and as ill at ease, as most true Britons do when their feelings are a good deal wrought upon, and they find themselves in a conspicuous position.

The fourth occupant of the carriage was Anthony Geddes, that old and faithful retainer of the house of Stirling, who had followed its fortunes from bright days to dark days, and from dark to bright. His lint-white locks fell back from his eager, radiant face; his back was bowed, as though with much bending over ledgers and tenants' records. His heart was full of thoughts of the boy Davie, full of regret and longing in that Davie was far away, instead of here besides his master's darling son in this the hour of his return.

Crash! clang! crash! went the bells. Heads were bared in greeting to the wanderer returned—the dead alive.

Ralph could scarce make his way along the path to the church-door for hands held out that must be met and clasped. Little Jake, active on his spindle pins, came to the fore like a man, and Master Ralph's "Ah, Jake, is that you?" fell like music on his ears. The farmer became gruff and husky with emotion, and Nancy well nigh wept as the young squire greeted both as old friends.

"He ain't forgot one on us," said Amos in triumphant glee; "but Lord above! ain't he changed, and ain't he now the very spit and fashion o' the father before him? When he gev' a bit o' a smile and caught me by t' hond, I could ha' thought t' see t' ould squire back again. His father's own son, lads—his father's own son!"

Those near murmured an assent, and Bessie wiped her eyes that she might see the clearer.

Only late the night before had Ralph arrived at his desolate home, there to be greeted by poor old Anthony—a greeting more of tears than smiles—there to find Gaylad standing by the well-known door, almost blind, yet "out of himself," as the butler put it, with joy at his young master's return. It was Cuthbert Deane led Ralph into the silent house, led him to where Alicia stood waiting to give him welcome. It was a strange and desolate home-coming, though it had been made the best of. Nurse Prettyman threw her arms about her nursling's neck, and broke into tears of mingled joy and grief; joy to see her dear boy once again; grief that had its rise in a deeper fount than any there wotted of. And there was the empty chair, the vacant place of which the first sight is to any of us as the stab of a knife that cuts right to the core of our hearts, while ringing in our ears is the doom pronounced of old on all that are mortal, "The place that knew him shall know him no more."

After that long night, during which thoughts and reminiscences of those whose voices should never more fall upon his ear jostled one another in his busy brain, the sunshine laden with the music of the sweet bell-voices, the hearty grasping hands, the smiles of welcome, the words of happy greeting, seemed a new strange world about Ralph

Stirling. His cheek was pale; his lips set in firm lines that told of feelings held in repression, yet swelling in his breast. He knew that the kindly feeling poured out upon him in such generous measure to-day was not all his own due, but was given to him as the son of the man who had been well-beloved among his fellows, high and low, rich and poor—the man whose tender nature, whose ready sympathy with sorrow, whose pity for the suffering and the sad, had been as cords that drew men's hearts, whether they would or no.

Cuthbert Deane was not one to whom people were apt to lend an inattentive ear. People who are very much in earnest seldom meet with lukewarmness in others, for earnestness is of all things most catching.

But to-day the vicar addressed a gathering of men and women whose ears were more or less deaf in consequence of their eyes being for ever drawn to the young squire's reverently bent head; being, in a word, focussed upon the Dale End pew. Calmly conscious of and amused by this state of affairs, somewhat full at heart himself too, if truth must be told, Cuthbert Deane cut his morning's discourse rather short, and thoroughly enjoyed the way in which Jake flung himself into the spirit of the concluding hymn.

"No wonder the chapel counts Jake as one of its brightest ornaments," thought the vicar, a little smile lurking under his beard, for—with heart and voice—and plenty of the latter—Jake led the rest, casting the rustic choir completely into the shade, and serenely unconscious of the stony glances bestowed upon him by the leader of that musical body;—led off "as if he was born to 't," as that indignant potentate remarked afterwards—

> "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
> Praise Him, all creatures here below;
> Praise Him above, ye heavenly host,
> Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

"And yo' did praise God, too, Jake, and no mistake about it," said the farmer, with a delighted chuckle, as the two came out together when the service was over.

"What else did I coom for?" retorted Jake. "'Whatever thy hand find to do, do it wi' a' thy moight,' says

t' Book, and when I praise the Lord I put a' my soul into 't."

"Aye, that dost thou," said the farmer; "an' a' thy lungs too. It's a marvel, Jake, as such a weazeny mon as thee can mak' so much noise."

"May be," said Jake, "may be; I'm gifted that way, I know; but I strive to be on my guard against undue upliftin's. Them as is gifted walks along pitfaa's and quagmires, neighbour, and should be wary lest spiritooal pride step in and bring them to a sorry end."

The farmer, in a high state of delight, nudged Nancy with his elbow, and went near to set her off laughing.

But Jake, serenely unconscious of satire, with his peaky nose uplifted, and his weazen face one sweet smirk of self-content, made his way among the crowd, comparing in his mind—most unfavourably to the former—church and chapel, orthodoxy and dissent.

This time, Sir Denby and his spouse drove off alone, old Anthony toddled away with Mrs. Geddes (gorgeously attired in honour of the festive character of the occasion), and Ralph lingered with the vicar and Alicia.

"I have not seen Mrs. Devenant and the child Hilda," he said, looking somewhat wistfully around the little groups that still lingered here and there.

A soft flush rose in Alicia's cheek. Her dislike to the mistress of the White House was not a thing t' at had dwindled and pined, but rather a feeling that had gathered, and was still gathering, strength.

Perhaps her husband wished to anticipate what she might say. At all events he spoke promptly in answer to Ralph's question.

"Mrs. Devenant is a great invalid, though many say her illness is more of the mind than of the body."

Ralph looked grave. He had heard the story of his father's death. He was wondering if the shock of it had been detrimental to the woman who had come nobly forward in the hour of need, proving herself a friend indeed.

"And—Hilda?" he asked, after a short silence.

"Is her mother's shadow," said the vicar. "Her devotion, her entire forgetfulness of self, are beautiful things to see. She seems to live only in and for her mother's life."

At the Vicarage gate the three lingered.

"Will you not come in, Ralph?" said Alicia; and her voice had a little tremble in it, that made Ralph's grave dark eyes look at her questioningly.

"No, thanks," he said; "not now—but I will be with you this evening."

"Cuthbert," said the vicar's wife, as they watched the tall lithe figure pass along the road beneath the grey shadows of the trees; "where do you think Ralph is going?"

"I don't think—I know," said the vicar. "He is going to the White House. My darling, what is it?"

"Perhaps some one is walking over my grave!" answered Alicia, smiling up at her husband, as if to deride her own weakness.

So they passed into the house that was their earthly paradise; and, being together, could not be but happy.

Yet Alicia was more silent than usual.

Meanwhile, Ralph betook himself up the road along which, one terrible night in the far-off past, the shadow of a woman had chased the shadow of a man—along which Hester Devenant had tracked her husband, Gabriel. When he reached the gates of the White House, Ralph stopped a moment, brought to a halt by the childish memories that came upon him like a flood.

How often peering through those bars had he watched for Davie—Davie, with gentle, loving, wistful face, and a tiny boat, carved out of white wood, nestling in his coat pocket! How often had he watched that dear father, whom his eyes should never more behold in life, driving in as he came home from the bank, while Jeremy, holding the gate open, looked as though he thought he was going through immense exertion on behalf of the family!

There was the nursery window, where he used to lie curled up in the window-seat, with the yellow pup upon his lap, and Nurse Prettyman—(dear, dear! how the poor old creature cried last night, to be sure)—held forth on the enormities of little people not wanting to go to bed in due and proper time.

What a long lifetime seemed to lie between that time and now! Was the weary, hopeless, benumbed man, who once sat crouched together facing the horror of a "thick darkness,"

from which issued the riot and the roar of many waters, in very truth the child with the curly locks, who clung to Geoffrey Stirling's hand, or stood, wrapped in admiration, at the knee of her whom he called his "pretty mamma"—that picture painted in pale but lovely colours, that picture which had faded out of his life?

The lilac's lavender pyramids were scenting the air; the laburnum was shaking out its yellow locks to the balmy breeze, so balmy and soft that its touch was a caress to every flower it blew upon. The year's first butterflies fluttered about from flower to tree, and from tree to flower, in a timid uncertain way, as though life to them were a new and beautiful thing, almost bewildering in its brightness and delight. The river—could it be the same that rushed and swirled so madly but a while ago?—stole along, whispering among the flowers and reeds, kissing the golden king-cups as it passed.

As Ralph took his way up the well-remembered path, as he neared the old porch, with its wealth of budding clematis, with tiny leaflets peeping out here and there, a woman's voice, exquisitely sweet and clear, yet holding ears in its full soft tones, sang a stave of an old, old, song. . . .

> "Love is not a feeling to pass away
> Like the balmy breath of a summer's day,—
> It is not—it cannot be—laid aside,
> It is not a thing to forget—or hide . . "

As both song and singer came nearer to the sun-warmed outer world, Ralph stood waiting, his eyes fixed on the place where he knew she must come into view, his dark head bared, a smile softening the lines of his lips.

There she stood at last, just under the tangle of the clematis—a woman, in all the exquisite beauty of maturity.

She wore a simple black dress, whose sweeping lines showed the supple grace of her slender form. About her throat was a broad ribbon, the colour of the lilac blossoms. Her brown locks, of the tint of the ripened nuts in autumn, rippled backwards from her open brow. Her eyes, blue as the speedwells that mirrored themselves in the dykes, were sweet and pure, yet grave beyond her years. In truth a certain sadness was to be read in all her lovely face, while

her smile was that of one who carries the cross God has sent to be borne, bearing it with a brave heart and in a loving spirit of trust and submission.

"Are you Hilda?" said Ralph, watching her as though she were some new wonder of that beautiful day of promise and plenty.

"Am I so changed?" she answered, giving question for question.

Then her hand, white and delicate, yet with no suggestion of feeble uselessness in its frank pressure, was laid in his, her grave eyes read his face, as his hers.

"You too, are changed, Master Ralph," she said.

"The old name," he answered, smiling, "and the old song too. I remember hearing you sing that at the Vicarage long ago."

"It was 'Miss Alicia' taught it to me—longer ago still—when I was ever such a little child. I used to sing it to my father."

Unconsciously both seemed loth to leave the sunny, scented garden, both seemed for the time being absolutely content.

"This is all very strange about you,' said Hilda earnestly; "it is like a story. I meant to have gone down to St. Mary's this morning, and then I should have seen you with the rest; but mother wasn't so well—I could not leave her."

"I came to see your mother."

"Yes, of course; I knew that as soon as I saw you. I am glad you have come."

"I missed her—and you, among the rest; and then I asked Mrs. Deane about you."

"Mother is never quite well now, and I am always with her. Will you come in,—Master Ralph?"

"Am I always to be called that?" he said, stepping under the clematis, and following Hilda across the hall.

"I like it," she said, with a gentle imperiousness delightful to behold.

At the door of that room into which a little troubled child had once carried a golden coin, all his store, Hilda stopped a moment, and turned a strange look back at her companion. It was a look that seemed to make some trouble that was hers his as well; a look that pleaded with him to be gentle to a sick and unreasonable woman.

"Mother," said Hilda, opening the door, "here is Master Ralph come to see you."

Mrs. Devenant, or something that looked like the shadow or wraith of the Hester Devenant we have known, looked up as her daughter spoke—looked beyond Hilda, to where, framed in the open doorway, stood the figure of Ralph Stirling. As she looked, Mrs. Devenant's face took the likeness of a statue; her eyes, staring and straining, seemed the only life left where all else was stone.

Ralph, after one moment's hesitation, hurried to her side, took her hand, bent over her with tenderest concern.

"I came to you at once," he said. "I knew you were with my father when he died. I have heard the story of it all. Do you wonder I could not keep away?"

He held the cold hand in his own, chafing it tenderly. Hilda, her eyes full of fear, stood by her mother's side.

"It is my fault," she said, with a little sigh of penitence; "I should not have brought you to her unawares. I did not think—I was too hasty. Mother, mother, what is it, dear?"

Their relative positions seemed strangely reversed. Hilda spoke as might a loving anxious mother to a suffering child.

Still, Hester's eyes, wide and full of some unspeakable horror, grew to the manly, pitiful face of the man who watched her with such pained solicitude. Still her features were but as a mask, while a slight froth oozed from the set lips.

"Had I better leave you?" said Ralph, deeply troubled.

Hilda made a sign of assent, and he was moving towards the door when Mrs. Devenant, raising the hand which he had dropped, cried out in a strange, strident voice: "Stay!"

A shudder passed over her; a moment she pressed her handkerchief to her lips. Then she looked up at Ralph and smiled.

"I am better now," she said—"almost well. The day has been warm, and I was a little faint. It has passed off now. Come and sit beside me. Let me give you a more fitting greeting."

Hilda, drawing a deep breath of relief, pulled down the

blind and shut out the garish light, for the sun beat in hotly.

Before long, Ralph had renewed his acquaintance with the goblins on the mantelshelf, and asked after his old and particular friend upon the stairs.

"Come and look at him!" said Hilda, laughing.

So they went. Mrs. Devenant leaned forward eagerly in her chair, grasping its arms closely, as she listened to their happy chatter. She heard them find the elf in question; heard them come down the low broad stairway; heard Ralph ask if he might go and see the old haunts by the river; heard the soft rustle of Hilda's dress as the two passed into the garden.

Then Hester rose from her chair, crossed to the casement, and put aside the blind.

Side by side the two were standing by the whispering river.

Hilda had caught up her hat as she passed through the hall, but it swung idly in her hand. So warm was the sunny garden it was not needed.

How fair she looked, with the little leaf-shadows touching her hair like fairy fingers!

Could this be Hilda, thought Ralph, looking, listening, wondering, with all his soul in his eyes?

He had left a child; he found a woman—a woman, too, who had felt and thought and suffered—a woman with "a face like a Benediction"—a woman who, merging her life in that of another, living only for that other, had so trampled her sweet self under foot as to rise from that voluntary abasement a thing perfectly lovely, half divine!

Mere beauty may enslave a man's senses; mere youth and charm may catch his fancy; but it is the woman who has thought and felt and suffered who twines herself most closely about his heart.

These two looked at each other in a grave amaze even while they spoke on common topics, recalling little incidents of Ralph's boyhood, speaking of Mrs. Devenant's broken health, of this or that, that anyone might have discussed. Each seemed saying to the other, by some strange and subtle language that knew no words, yet that was as real as though possessing endless dictionaries of terms and meanings, "I have been looking for you always, and now—I have found you."

And Hester, watching, grew eager—full of passionate feeling. A hot flush burned on her cheek; her eyes shone and glistened with a cruel light; she beat her hands together in a restrained frenzy of joy, as the two, side by side, bending a little towards each other now and again, swaying apart only to draw near once more, passed out of sight, following the winding of the river.

"I was foiled," she muttered—"foiled! But it may be yet! Who knows?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SUMMER OF THE HEART.

Obscurity is ofttimes safety. Had Mrs. Devenant been one of the county matrons—the equal of Lady Boscawen and other notabilities—had Hilda been a maiden of high degree, the frequency with which the young squire of Dale End betook himself along a certain woodland path bestrewn with fragrant pine-spears and musical with the song of many birds—a path that ran parallel with the river, and led picturesquely and unobtrusively to the White House—would have quickly become a matter of general discussion and dismayed comment. Doubtless, also, Hester Devenant would have been denounced as a dangerous and designing person, and gentle Hilda as a forward and daring maiden.

As it was, led by the sweet desire for nearness and interchange of thought that is the silken cord with which love begins to bind his victims preparatory to making them his abject and entire slaves, Ralph entered upon a new and beautiful Wonderland.

If the way to this enchanted country lay along a woodland path where on either hand rose the pines like so many slender minarets, giving here and there a glimpse of the far-off sea—if through their trellis-work of branches came a whispering wind that murmured of exquisite possibilities in a time yet to come—if every bird on every bough seemed to be singing one of the songs of a sweet paradise of promise—why, so much the better for the man who was

assuredly learning to love well, if not just what the world that owned him would have called wisely.

The great thing in life, the very salt of life, is to be really in earnest; and assuredly Ralph was terribly in earnest in his love for Hilda Devenant. So much so, that, when he believed himself to be only falling in love, he was over head and ears, and had laid all the best that was in him at a woman's feet.

He ceased to feel the loneliness of Dale End oppressive. Rather did he learn to love the quiet of the old place, since he peopled it with his own glowing fancies, and kept company with his own happy thoughts. He sang or whistled as he walked about the grounds and in the shrubberies, or wandered from room to room.

The new buoyancy of his spirit communicated itself to those about him. Anthony Geddes became almost skittish, as might an ancient and worn-out steed cut a feeble gambol or two, and fondly renew the days of its youth in a fertile imagination. Even Gaylad brisked up a bit, and wagged his tail with spasmodic energy at the sound of his young master's voice. As to Jeremy, Ralph vowed there was no such gardener in existence; though it cannot be denied that that functionary drew a long face when the young squire culled the rarest and choicest blossoms in the hot-houses, and made off with them, Heaven knew where. There was, however, one member of the Dale End household who appeared to be wholly uninfluenced by the new-born buoyant spirit of its master. This was Nurse Prettyman.

The glittering sheath still held its place at the side of the waist whose girth was considerably greater than in days gone by. The busy knitting-pins still clicked and shimmered as they went at a marvellous speed that yet in no way hindered their owner's sharp eyes from detecting carelessness or neglect on the part of handmaiden or serving-man. The large soft curls on either side of Mrs. Prettyman's face were snowy white, but her eyes were still blue and clear, for all her sixty years and more. Yet the sonsie cheerfulness of aspect that had once made her the life and soul of the little household, whose actual mistress was an ailing, fretful woman, was gone.

"When she comes to take a dish of tea with me," said

Mrs. Geddes to her lord, "she's no proper mind to crumpets hot and hot, hasn't Mrs. Prettyman; and she never so much as smiled when I showed her my new green camlet, though I held it up in the best light, so as she could see the double skirt and flounced headin' lovely."

"Things have come about altogether too surprisin' of late for Mrs. Prettyman to take them in," replied Anthony, who was walking slowly up and down the cosy firelit room, with a pleasant sense upon him of ruminating over late exciting events; "she's like a person who has had a souse of cold water, and hasn't had time to get his breath back, is Mrs. Prettyman. We're all a bit in that way, Meg, for, as you know, I didn't sleep steady myself for an hour at a time for nights and nights before Master Ralph came home, and took to shoutin' so one night you thought the house was on fire, and cried out to me that your best cap was in the green box behind the door. Mrs. Prettyman will settle down in time, Meg, never fear. She's only mightily stirred up like the rest of us."

But the "settling down" thus prognosticated did not come about; and at last, even dazzled as he was with the mist of fond fancies that haunted his brain and blinded him to what was nearest, Ralph noticed that something was wrong with his old nurse.

He rallied her.

"I tell you what it is, Prettyman," he said, his hand falling lightly and tenderly on her shoulder as he spoke, "you've been thinking about that ghost I heard such tales about."

The effect of his words startled him.

She threw up her hands as if to silence him; a great fear dawned in her eyes; her head began to shake and tremble as though she had the palsy.

"Dunnot speak on't, Master Ralph, dunnot speak on't, for the dear love of God!" she cried; "I conna 'bide to hear tell on't!"

"Why, nursey, dear old nursey," said Ralph, falling into the old-time name unawares; "who has been scaring you with old women's tales like this? Do you remember long ago, when I was a little fellow, how you used to chide me for really believing that there were fairies in among the

dykes? And now—here you are ready to whimper over a scarecrow seen by a pack of fools in their cups! I shall be fancying you saw the ghost yourself, nursey, or thought you did, which comes to the same thing," he added, with one of the old merry laughs that sounded like a voice from the far-off past.

"Happen I did have an odd fancy or two," said Nurse Prettyman, turning away from him, and smoothing down her apron with shaking hands; "old folks will, you know, now and again; and I age fast, Master Ralph, I age fast."

She hurried away; and Ralph, looking after her, muttered to himself,—

"She hasn't a nerve left, poor old soul!"

Then, Hilda taking possession of his mind and thoughts again, and leaving no smallest corner for any one else, he forget about Nurse Prettyman and her "old folks' fancies," and grew more and more hearty and energetic every day."

For summer reigned, not only over the beautiful world, but in his own heart also.

Every tenant on every farm, even to the smallest and most outlying, was visited by the lord of the manor, and repairs were gone into to such a tune that Anthony more than once looked blank. Ralph was so happy himself that he wanted to make all the world within his reach happy too. Mounted on his coal-black mare Ruby, he seemed to pervade Becklington and all the surrounding country.

From one country house to another he went gaily, and the county folks said what a good thing it was that he was getting over the troubles that had fallen so thick and fast upon his young life; while those who had large families of marriageable daughters inquired of one another with a certain wistfulness "if Ralph Stirling were likely to marry?"

Certainly the young man in question made himself agreeable on all social occasions. But, though many women found him charming, none found him tender—always excepting Lady Boscawen, whose heart held a very warm corner for him, and whom he believed to be the best of women.

"When it came to coming home," he once said to her, "I thought of you, and it seemed like having a sort of mother."

Lady Boscawen's long face twitched a little as she looked in Ralph's earnest one, and she showed no displeasure when he stooped and kissed her hand. She had lost her only son early in life, and Ralph often reminded her of what might have been and now could never be.

That same night she resolved to send for her sister Julia's second girl, a well-favoured damsel, who could sing like a laverock and dance in high-heeled shoes with shiny buckles, so that "all the world wondered," upon a visit of indefinite length.

"It will be a kindness to Julia, and an excellent thing altogether," quoth Lady Boscawen to her lord (darkly hinting at future possibilities); at which Sir Denby only grunted out something that his spouse felt convinced would be better ignored. Like most men, he had a great horror of match-making, and, being only mortal, could not resist a grin when, the enticing damsel having arrived (armed with every weapon most calculated to bring about the subjugation of man), Ralph, not without some reproach in his manner, pathetically asked Lady Boscawen why she had imported a visitor, seeing that things were "so much nicer when they were alone?"

"It is very unkind of you to laugh, Denby," said Lady Boscawen.

"I am not laughing," replied that perplexed individual, who couldn't bear to ruffle his wife's peace of mind, and felt ready to order Ralph to marry Julia's second girl on the spot.

"Well, you are smiling, and that is worse—it insinuates more," said Lady Boscawen, lifting her Roman nose, and glancing scathingly at her husband.

Sir Denby mumbled out a hope that "things would improve one of these days."

But they didn't, as far as Ralph and the young lady were concerned, so that at last Lady Boscawen was constrained to say that she feared his heart was hard as the nether mill-stone—it being impossible that there could be anything more suited to melt a heart of proper consistency than Julia's second girl.

But Ralph's heart was not hard at all. He happened to have given it away, even to the smallest atom. He had

absolutely kept back none of it. He was always wondering that the world held such a woman as Hilda Devenant. It was a greater wonder still that this marvel of beauty, and tenderness, and self-devotion should exist—for him.

Surely, he thought, he must have been born under some lucky star! He could not look upon himself as the same as other men, or as one who stood on the same level with them. He seemed to himself a thing apart. He was as a crowned king—in that Hilda loved him.

For he was sure she did that.

In his solitary musings this conviction lighted up all his heart and mind as a lamp lights up a room and fills it with warmth and cheer.

Even that strange picture in his father's favourite room, that grim presentment of the dying miser, became the channel for pleasant in lieu of gloomy thoughts.

"The heart should be set on love, not on gold," he said once, speaking out loud in the earnestness of his mood, and standing opposite the man who lay writhing as he watched his treasure rifled; "for death cannot kill love. We can take love with us when we go."

From which it will be seen that his love for Hester Devenant's daughter was a passion, not a fancy; that its roots had taken hold of his whole being, and that, if it had to be torn forth, then would his heart bleed, and it would leave a deep and gaping wound.

Yes, Hilda loved him! Why else the dawn of that dear content in her sweet serious eyes as they met his in gladdest greeting? Why else that tremble on her lips as she bade him adieu—that little sigh (not of anger) as he made her hand a long and willing prisoner? More than all, why else that sure, firm trust in his sympathy with every sorrow that touched her gentle heart?

Yet the reading, or trying to read, Hilda's character was not all plain sailing even to the man whose eyes were sharpened by love, whose perceptions were made keen by an eager longing after perfect knowledge.

Though she was open and confiding as a child in some ways, there were yet shut chambers in Hilda's heart of which Ralph could not find the key. There was some "trouble" between her and the vicar's wife; that "Miss

Alicia" who had let Gabriel's little daughter make tinkling music on the keys of the old harpsichord, taught her to sing quaint "songs of love and longing," and fed her with syllabub in her housekeeper's room in the days when old Squire Ashby reigned at Dale End.

"She is an ideal woman," said Ralph once, as he and Hilda wandered by the river; "she is like music, making all things sweet about her."

But, as he spoke thus of Cuthbert Deane's wife, Ralph noticed that fair Hilda's nut-brown head was turned aside, and he saw the hand that clasped its fellow tremble.

When she looked at him again it was through the sheen of tears.

"She is all that, and more," said the girl, with lips that shook as they spoke. "She is one of Heaven's blessed comforters. I know it all, Master Ralph, better even than you do."

"And yet——" said Ralph.

"And yet there are things I cannot speak of—even to you," answered Hilda; and turned to other topics.

Then there was Davie. He was another puzzle. Neither Hilda nor her mother cared to speak of him. Once, when Ralph said he hoped for his return, Mrs. Devenant pressed her hand upon her bosom as though some sudden pang had pierced her through and through; while Hilda, with a new and strange defiance in her look and voice, bade Ralph go, and leave the two—mother and daughter—alone.

"Has there been any quarrel between the Devenants and Davie?" said Ralph to the vicar's wife a few days later.

"Hilda never told me so. She has lost all confidence in me, Ralph—all love for me," answered Alicia sadly. "But I think—nay, I am sure—that Davie loved her."

"Did he tell her so?" said Ralph. The words did not come easily.

"I think he did. There was something very strange and ad over them both at one time."

"Yes, that is it," thought Ralph, as he took his way home through the twilight. "Davie loved her, and Mrs. Devenant knew it. The poor soul is so dependent on my darling now that the thought of Davie's return—the return of the

lover who wanted to steal the one dear thing that life holds for her—could not be borne."

This reflection, wise and plausible as it was, opened unpleasant aspects of his own case to Ralph's mental vision.

Was Mrs. Devenant kind, courteous—nay, for her, gentle and even winning, to him—only so long as he did not declare himself? If he asked for Hilda, would he at once take the guise of an enemy in those dark and sombre eyes that were so often laden with pain and brooding sadness, yet softened as they dwelt on him?

The present was so happy, with its constant meetings, its short partings, that had a sweetness all their own, and its precious interchange of thought and feeling, that he trembled to put things to the test, and of a lovely present make a troubled future.

Jeremy's gardens were by this time blushing with June's fair wealth of roses. The standards, like monster posies, lifted their flower-laden branches to the sun-bright sky; the little banksia dotted the old gables with golden buttons, and the stately tea-rose bent her lovely head, faint with the perfume of her own sweet breath.

"My queen, my queen! you shall walk among the roses, with me by your side, with your dear hand in mine. All the world shall see that my love is deep and true, and that you are the rose of my life!"

Thus did our lover rave to his own heart, of a time that yet should be, as he gazed on the beauty of the home that was his own, and one day should be Hilda's too.

Even the old cedar on the lawn was woven into his day-dream, for the shade of that veteran tree was purple and cool even on the hottest day, and there he should lie at Hilda's feet, and look into Hilda's eyes, there linger till the prying stars came out and tried their best to peer through the thick branches at a mortal lover and his "dear, dear love."

The cedar could have told its story of human love and human longing already, as we know. Perhaps the spirit of the past—the spirit of that day in which Alicia had bidden a man wait and hope, even as the patriarch Jacob served for Rachel in the days of old—lingered about it and filled Ralph's mind with happy fancies as he wandered by.

Life cannot be insipid—not a day of it can seem dreary or monotonous—to the man who rises in the morning with the prospect of meeting, ere night shall once more shroud the world, the loving, steadfast look of the woman who loves him. To such an one there must always be one hour in the twelve that is a note of gladness; one hour that shines hotly enough to brighten all the rest.

It was so with Ralph Stirling.

As he opened his eyes of a morning and heard the birds twittering in the thick ivy, he thought, "I shall see Hilda to-day." As he lay down to his rest at night he recalled the sweetness of the meeting that had been; the fairness of his love; the touch of her womanly hand; the maidenliness of her graceful bearing; the exquisite tones of the voice that seemed to sing to him alone of all the world:

"It is not—it cannot be—laid aside,
It is not a thing to forget or hide."

Of all the songs, he loved that old song best. The first note of it made him fancy that he stood there waiting for her, as he stood that golden Sunday in the sunshine till she came to him from under the tangle of the clematis, singing as she came.

That moment he had found the sacred and beautiful thing that never could be hidden away or forgotten—the woman who was fated to be the inspiration as well as the love of his life.

Was it not so in very truth? If he had longed to do well before, did he not long twice as ardently now to live his life to the highest level of which it was capable?

His wealth—that great wealth bequeathed to him by the father whom all men loved—was beautiful in his eyes, because through it he could lavish all things beautiful upon the woman he loved. But this was not its only value in his eyes—hardly even its greatest—since to make a good and noble use of it seemed the only way of being really worthy of Hilda's love.

Was he not full of plans for the help and consolation of those who were less fortunate than himself? Had he not delighted in telling Hilda of these schemes—Utopian, may be—beautiful assuredly? Had she not delighted in listening?

Should they not walk hand in hand through life, they two, loving and loved—not only by each other, but by the poor, the sorrowful, and the suffering? Theirs would be no idle, useless lives; no lives sunk and sodden in selfish enjoyment of the luxury that wealth can give; but lives in which each would grow dearer and dearer to the other, as each inspired to higher, holier, nobler aims, and grander deeds!

Hilda was no woman to be a man's mere plaything, to sit at his feet and smile. No; her place was by his side, next his heart; she would be one with all his aspirations, the tender, gentle almoner of his charities, the life and soul of his ambitions.

Truly Ralph's was a fair dream; the airy castle that he had builded with his hands was a noble edifice! And yet, they say the course of true love never does run smooth. If this be so, and trouble be the child of truth, then was Ralph's love for Hilda true enough to beget trouble deep and dire.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN OLD SONG.

Ralph Stirling was no fool. The training which his father Geoffrey had given him, the careful tutoring, together with much seeing of foreign lands and learning of foreign tongues, was indeed hardly likely to culminate in such a result, since good seed sown on good soil is bound to produce a fine crop. He possessed great knowledge of the world for one so young. He knew his own world. He knew that that world would by no means clap hands in frenzied applause if he married Hester Devenant's daughter.

As long as a man or woman who has risen in the world does nothing to make him or herself either conspicuous or disagreeable, the world is ready to be forgetful and complaisant enough.

The people of Becklington had accepted Hester Devenant as the mistress of the White House, as a woman who intruded herself nowhere, and who, if eccentric, was

assuredly nothing worse. Had Hester chosen to do so, she might have made her way among the local gentry of the neighbourhood. But she did not choose. She met advances with stubborn repulsion. Once, when the vicar's wife ventured to put in a plea for Hilda, hinting that a glimpse of society now and then might be good for her, she nearly frightened that gentle lady out of her wits. Hester had been an Ishmael among women all her days, and had apparently grown enamoured of the *rôle*. Therefore did many persons of some position and vast curiosity long to know her. That which is unattainable has ever a charm all its own. Had Mrs. Devenant betrayed a wish to mingle with these persons, they would doubtless have dubbed her "pushing"; as it was they agreed to call her "peculiar," and her daughter Hilda "interesting."

But once it should become known that the girl was to become the wife of the young squire of Dale End, things would take a changed complexion. It would be promptly and acridly called to mind that Hester Devenant was but a farmer's daughter, and that she had, in the days when she and Gabriel lived up among the dykes, been seen by more than one eye-witness to "whitestone her own doorstep." These facts, and others like unto them, had long since received decent burial. Like all such facts, however, they could be exhumed at the shortest notice, and even gazed upon with a decidedly magnifying eye if need were.

People who, in the olden days, before M. Lemaire left all his worldly possessions to his niece Hilda, would have thought that they were behaving "nicely" to Mrs. Devenant if they bade her the time of day as they passed her with her basket of frugal marketing upon her arm, would now have been ready to receive her as, comparatively speaking, an equal. But there could be no possible guarantee that they would not remember having so passed her many times and oft, if it were convenient to do so, which it doubtless would be at the smallest hint that her daughter had drawn the grand matrimonial prize of the day. It might promptly be suggested, too—under such circumstances—that she had volunteered to nurse the old squire in his hour of need, with the crafty design of getting a "footing" in the house, and ultimately marrying Hilda to the young squire. That

Ralph was, at that time, believed to be dead, would have gone for nothing, since, when people are spiteful, they are rarely, if ever, logical.

Ralph knew that all these things were so; but he believed himself to possess a strong defence against the enemy in Lady Boscawen. It has been said that he regarded her as the best of women. With him the best meant the most generous. A lurking and rather comical fancy that she would find it more easy to forgive Hilda, now that pretty Ethel no longer adorned the parent nest, made him smile, as he mentally placed Ethel's mother in the position of Hilda's social godmother and warm-hearted ally. He counted, too, —love is apt to make a man rather selfish—upon that halo of reflected tenderness that surrounded the living prototype of Lady Boscawen's dead son. And then Hilda would plead her own cause. Who could look upon her and not love her? Who could listen to the tones of the voice that, even when it was gladdest, held a ring of sadness, and not be moved and won? It was impossible to see and know Hilda Devenant without recognising the fact that her life had not been as that of other women. Self-repression, the habitual thought of another that pushes into the background every thought of self, those lessons that come to us with middle age, with wifehood, motherhood, and the trials and struggles of life, had come to Hilda in the morning of her days. They had left their mark in ripeness and sweetness; but in sadness too. Hilda, then, was bound to win the heart of Lady Boscawen. She was destined to reign in the county, a fellow queen with that best of women, her chosen friend, almost her adopted daughter—for Ralph's imagination was fervid in this phase of his mental life, and its visions were rosy-tinted as a summer sky at eventide. The part that Mrs. Devenant was to play in this blissful state of affairs was hardly defined enough to be a vision at all. It was a sort of misty vacuum to be presently filled in by the hand of time.

One lovely-tinted afternoon, in the month that gives us just here and there a touch of gold upon the trees, and a dash of red across the woods, Lady Boscawen, returning from a round of visits to various friends both far and near, pursued her lord into the sacred retreat of the smoking-room. Her

face wore a look of portentous gravity, there was a line visible between her brows, and an injured droop at the corners of her mouth, that told of disturbing elements.

"Denby," she said, sitting down on a desirably luxurious chair, but sitting bolt upright, as refusing to be cajoled by it, "I have been hearing things of Ralph."

Now Sir Denby had been hearing things of Ralph for some time back, and keeping the said things from his spouse, lest her soul should be vexed thereby.

Hence he displayed a guilty and crestfallen demeanour as he met the severe gaze of her eyes, and noticed that the hands with which she smoothed out her gloves upon her knee trembled ever so slightly.

"You have heard that Ralph is doing that which is not fitting?" said Lady Boscawen magisterially. "Denby, I hate deceit!"

"I know you do, my dear," said Denby uneasily; "but you see I thought they might be just silly rumours."

"You should have told me; I could have sifted them."

"What is there to prevent you sifting them now, my dear?"

"If all I have heard to-day be true, it is not a case of sifting the state of affairs, but of swallowing them whole." Here Lady Boscawen gave a gulp, adding, with a pathetic sigh, "if one can!"

Sir Denby began to whistle softly to himself to pass the time away.

"It is most unfitting," said Lady Boscawen; "and you, Denby, are very heartless not to be a little more sympathetic."

"God bless my soul!" replied Sir Denby, much moved; "I'm as sorry as anything, but I've seen this girl—Mrs. Devenant's daughter—and I'm bound to say she's a most fitting——"

"Wife for Ralph Stirling?" suggested Lady Boscawen, with withering sarcasm.

"No, no; a most fitting person to turn a man's head—to make him ready to make a fool of himself, don't you know?"

"No, I do not know, Denby. It is only persons with ill-regulated minds who can understand such things, I should

say." Lady Boscawen looked as though her own mind were regulated to an inch as she spoke, rose, and left the room with a crushing dignity that left her lord absolutely nowhere.

But her heart, apparently, hardly kept pace with her mind, for, before the evening was over, she began to wonder if it would ever be possible to forgive Ralph should he do the "unfitting" thing of marrying Hilda Devenant. Next she called to mind that some one had said that the girl had been educated in Paris. That was a point in her favour certainly. Anyhow, Lady Boscawen was sure it would be easier to forgive Ralph than if Ethel had not been already well married.

"I have noticed the girl at church," she said to the penitent and conciliatory Sir Denby, late that night, "and I think—nay, I am sure,—that with a little brushing-up she might be—yes, quite presentable. As to the mother, she is doubtless a crafty, designing person, and has thrown the young people together purposely."

Sir Denby thought of "Julia's second girl," but, like a wise man, held his peace.

Hilda Devenant, then, was likely to become a source of discord among the county people round about Becklington. Ralph's constant happy journeyings through the pine-woods, with their peeps of the shimmering sea, and their choirs of joyous songsters, were being talked about; were even commented upon at The Safe Retreat in the full conclave of its Saturday nights.

True, a certain restraint was observed "be-front of Jeremy," lest that functionary should "carry words" to Mrs. Prettyman, and so it should reach the young squire's ears that Widow Green's customers were making free with his concerns; but, for all that, curiosity ran high, and Farmer Dale, on more occasions than one, shook his head ominously, and said he "wondered what things were coming to"; an observation that, as Matthew Hawthorne whispered to Amos "might mean a lot if you looked at it doobiously and with intent."

Meanwhile, what of Hilda—what of the centre figure in all this war of words and wonderment?

Never could any creature be imagined less conscious of

the stir she was creating ; never was a gentle heart so lapped in its own blissful dreaming, to the utter exclusion of all sounds from the world beyond.

It was Hilda's habit to look upon herself in the light of a person vowed to one object in life, a sort of votary at the shrine of a self-elected saint. Assuredly Hester Devenant was no saint; yet to her service and worship was Hilda vowed. The girl had reasoned and dreamed herself into the conviction that this sacred office of hers was a legacy left to her by that father whose memory was still infinitely precious to her, whose words of love and soft caressing ways were as vividly remembered now as in the days when they were dear realities.

"*Ma reine, ma petite reine!*" How could Hilda forget these words? Were they not the last she had ever heard spoken by *mon camarade's* lips—the loving valediction of a parting that was supreme? After that all was the coldness of death ; the silence of the grave. After that *mon camarade* slept so soundly that he could not hear her calling, and when she touched him he was as cold as the ice in winter. Chilled by that awful contact, how glad she had been of the warm, grey kitten nestling in her arms, even of the wilful beautiful sunbeam that would come stealing in through the chink of the curtained window. It all seemed so long, so long ago, and yet her father's love, and death, and loss, had struck the key-note of Hilda's life.

He was gone, and she—little Hilda—his *petite reine*—must take care of "mothie." It would be difficult, perhaps, to trace the mental process by which the desolate child got at this inversion of relationship. Perhaps the lack of care and tenderness for herself on Hester's part helped to bring it about. If she could not receive she would give. Certain memories had oftentimes arisen to trouble her sorely—memories of hard words dealt out to a sorrowing man; of the scourge pitilessly applied, in such fashion that each stroke, in a time to come, took the semblance of a crime.

When she recalled such memories as these, a perfect passion of pity would shake Hilda's soul for that mother who was to her an abiding mystery. The sense of restlessness, of an eternal seeking for something that had oppressed her in her childish companionship with Hester, had long since ex-

plained itself to her as the spirit of a sleepless penitence and remorse for hard words upon which death had set his awful seal, making them things indelible. Even lack of love towards herself was lovingly interpreted as the result of an entire and absorbing love and regret given to the dead.

"Mothie's heart has no room for me," the girl used to say to herself, sad at her own isolation (yet never jealous of that other). "It is too full of sorrow for him."

Then came the sweetness of her friendship with Alicia Deane, the perfect companionship, the never-failing sympathy, all the still tempered sunshine that women can shed upon each other's pathway in life, if they will.

But shadows gathered, grew, closed in.

Hester became strange, silent, moody. Words to which Hilda could affix no meaning fell from her lips. In the night-time she wandered from room to room, Hilda (her heart throbbing heavily with mingled fear and wonder) following her, a gentle wraith with the wealth of nut-brown hair floating on its shoulders.

The squire was dead. Poor Davie had set sail for a distant shore with a bleeding heart in his breast, and Hilda's hand had dealt the wound. When the fond but hopeless love that Hester had fostered for her own ends came to be clothed in words, it found no echo in the loved one's heart, and Davie realised too late that he had built his house of hope upon the sands.

As if this were not sorrow enough to fall upon the fair head of Gabriel's daughter, a deeper grief was added thereunto. She saw that bitter estrangement had come about between her mother and Davie. More than once the sound of raised and angry voices had made itself heard in the White House, and Hilda had to run, with her pink palms pressed to her pretty ears, lest words not meant for her to hear should find their way thither.

It was a terrible time, and she was glad when Davie went away. Nothing is so painful to a true woman as to find herself loved in deed and in truth when she has naught to give in exchange for such precious merchandise; and Hilda was the truest of women. She took to lying awake at night and listening to the river, as with soft, swift rush it made for its haven in the sea. Falling asleep at last

with its murmur in her ear, she would dream that some one was drowning in treacherous waters—and wake, to tremble and sigh at the fancied echo of a cry for help from among the toss and the turmoil of trembling waves.

In addition to these nervous fancies—a gruesome and exceedingly terrible dread—a dread that more than once in her life already had glared upon her for a moment like some horrible mask from behind a curtain, seen for an instant, and then hidden mercifully away, began to take a form more distinct and tangible than ever it had done before.

She grew afraid to leave her mother alone even for an hour. She gradually became her constant and unfailing shadow, and night and day she prayed with all her earnest heart that God would avert the thing she feared, or, failing this, make her wise to meet it.

Breaking in upon this strange, sad life of hers, this daily strife of fear, and watchfulness, and unrequited love, came the sudden news of "Master Ralph's" safety. Then Hilda knew that it was of him she had dreamed when she had heard that cry for help ringing across the troubled sea, when she had listened to the rushing of the river till it grew as the voice of many waters, making haste to close over a boy's bright head.

She did not know why she did so, but on the evening of the day that brought such blessed news to Becklington Hilda gathered a few sweet blossoms from the window-garden at the White House, and, in the grey gloom, hurrying to the grave of Geoffrey Stirling and his wife Lucy, laid them reverently down, there to give out their perfumed breath and die.

She stumbled as she left the churchyard, for her eyes were dim with tears, yet her heart sang, and the river, that night, seemed to sing too, as if it were telling a brave story in rhyme to the listening night.

And so the years passed on, until that summer dawned that was to bring Ralph Stirling back to his desolate home.

Hilda had longed to go with the rest of the world to St. Mary's that gay, glad Sunday morning. But Mrs. Devenant had one of her restless fits upon her. Nothing was right; everything was wrong.

Hilda, driven hither and thither by this whim or that,

chid herself for a passing feeling of impatience, heard the bells pealing and clashing, and smiled to think what a bonnie world it was, after all.

She thought it bonnier still as, singing the old song that Miss Alicia had taught her in the olden days, she passed under the shadow of the clematis to find "Master Ralph" waiting for her, bare-headed, in the sunshine.

She had thought of him as a tall stripling, with laughing dark eyes, and a winning grace of manner that made him different from his fellows. She found him a man older in look by many a year than those he could actually count, full of a grave and exquisite courtesy, showing the signs of having passed through much suffering and of consequent powers of sympathy with the pain of others.

And from that hour and day all the world was changed to Hilda. Not that her outward life changed one jot (save that it was cheered and beautified by his frequent presence); but all its trials were lightened, all its troubles became easier to bear. Even that great and terrible dread seemed to show a less threatening aspect; at times it almost vanished out of sight.

Her mother was assuredly less fitful and depressed. True she never spoke of Ralph in his absence (a silence under which Hilda had chafed not a little); but she smiled when he came, the old wondrous beauty dawning in her face, the old power of charm that had once won Davie's heart making itself felt.

Hilda never stopped to ask herself whether she loved this man who had brought the fulness of summer into her heart, as the sun had warmed the earth to bloom and beauty. Was she not vowed to the shrine of her saint? Could thoughts of self be permitted to intrude themselves between her and her life's work? No. But how beautiful was God's world, this one year of all others! How exquisite His gifts of the sympathy and companionship of those like-minded with ourselves!

Hilda drank in all the story of Ralph's plans and ambitions for the future with the eagerness of a child listening to a fairy-tale, adding little suggestions of her own here and there, such as made her listener long to kiss the lips that uttered them.

He thought he had never known the full meaning of the word "helpmeet" till now. He thought that he had never till now known the meaning of the word "life"—all the noble uses it might be put to, all the precious joys it might bring.

The day had been hot and sultry, but towards sundown a little breeze sprang up, and came stealing among the flowers in the White House garden, stirring their sleepy heads gently as if to rally them from their stupor. The shadows on the grass that had been asleep all day began to move gently as in a slow and stately measure.

A thrush was singing on the bough near the widely-opened casement that looked on to the river. Two people listened to his trilling song—Ralph and Hilda.

Hester had fallen asleep in the room across the house-place, for she was weary with the long hot hours of the day—weary, too, with the beating in the brain that seemed to take the sound of mad accusing words—words uttered over and over again, hard and pitiless as the strokes of a hammer on an anvil.

Hilda lay back in the corner of the low cushioned seat that ran round the window. Ralph stood leaning against the frame. Hilda watched the swelling, speckled breast of the feathered songster. Ralph watched her. She wore a dress of pure daffodil, and at her throat was a posy of purple bryony. A light, as of a deep content and joy unspeakable, shone in her sweet and serious eyes, a faint smile came and went upon her perfect lips.

"There, he has flown," said Ralph; "after bidding us such sweet good-night."

Had that bird's joyous song seemed to Hilda as the voice of her own heart, that she found no answer but a sigh?

"Am I to have no other song to-night?" asked Ralph.

"What you will."

"Then I will—the song I love best of all."

The colour deepened in Hilda's cheek, and her bosom rose and fell as she crossed the room, and took her place at the piano that stood in a deep recess.

"Must it really be that one?" she said, a new timidity holding her in thrall.

"Really; that and no other."

A few soft minor chords followed each other in falling

sequence, and then Hilda's voice, that clear sweet voice, whose deeper tones held the sadness of tears, began the old song that Ralph loved to hear:

> "Love is not a feeling to pass away,
> Like the balmy breath of a summer day;
> It is not—it cannot be—laid aside,
> It is not a thing to forget or hide. . . . ."

Never had that beautiful voice been so unmanageable. It trembled so sadly that at last the words of the song were hardly audible. It did not tremble less when Ralph's hand was on her shoulder; it ceased altogether—how could it do otherwise?—when he drew her head back against his breast, and bent till his lips rested upon hers in the long first kiss of happy love.

"My darling," he whispered, when that kiss was ended, "is that our betrothal song?"

And Hilda, rising, came to his side, laid her two hands upon his shoulders, and answered:

"It is what you will."

Doubtless she had forgotten just then about the saint and the shrine, and the life vowed to one devotion. To say the truth she had forgotten all things in earth or heaven, save that Ralph Stirling stood there before her, her own, and not another's; her king whom she would gladly follow through the world—her lord, to whose behest she would at all times answer:

"Wie du willst."

There was no room for any other thought in all her heart, save that. To give herself wholly, keeping nothing back; to love, even as she saw and felt she was beloved.

> "And all the body—all the soul to that,
> The speech, and shape, and hand, and foot, and heart,—"

even these must she give. Nothing would content her less than the entire surrender, held in those tender, simple words:

"It is what you will."

She had had but little joy in her life, and now, the greatest joy of all had come to her

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SHADOW.

"You never seem very far away from me—never so far but that a thought can call you back again. It must be that you are garnered up in my heart so closely that neither time nor distance can take you from me. I never seem to be alone, even when I wander in the woods among the pines, where all is hushed and still—even there you are beside me—the thought of you is all about me like the very air I breathe. I often wonder how I lived before you came to me—Ralph!"

In the glamour of this supreme hour,—the hour of a love for the first time confessed, for the first time finding voice in lingering kiss and sweet caress,—the shadows—even that one most sad and terrible shadow—that deepened about Hilda's pathway, seemed to lift and break, as she yielded all her heart with a divine prodigality to the man who drank in every word that fell from her lips, as the thirsty might drink of a chalice long craved for and long withheld.

Her sorrow-darkened childhood, her girlhood full of strange thoughts, her womanhood weighted with vague misgiving and tender responsibility, and so robbed of its elasticity and youthfulness,—all these things counted now as less than naught. In past days they had seemed as burdens too heavy to be borne; but now—since this exquisite shining, this wondrous radiance of love had made the world so fair to her eyes, and life had grown to be a thing desirable as beautiful—they took such guise no more.

If she was in direst trouble, there was one to whom she could go in fullest trust and say, "I am sad—comfort me," or, "I am sorry—take half the burden of my sorrow."

Nay, she scarce would need to say these things, for Ralph would read her heart as he might read a well-loved book, even to its smallest record; no tears should ever rise again to the eyes that had shed so many, but his loving lips should kiss it away ere it had time to fall; and if some great and terrible sorrow should come—which might

Heaven in pitifulness forefend!—then they would clasp hands close and fast (these two who loved each other "beyond belief"), and so meet it bravely.

Thoughtful and grave beyond her years, yet was Hilda in many ways simple still as the child who had sat singing at her work in the little house among the dykes. She knew no guile of counterfeited coyness; no trickery of an assumed tenderness. For her the admiration of the many held no charm; but the approbation of those she loved was as the sunshine to the flowers. Such a nature, existing in close contact with such a one as that of Hester Devenant, could not but suffer acutely. Hungry for a kind look or a tender word, Hilda had had to starve. She had given all and received little or nothing in return. But this experience and discipline of life, bitter as they had been in the past, now added an unspeakable content and happiness to the present. Sweeter to her than they could have been to any woman less sternly schooled were Ralph's great gifts of tenderness and sympathy; those gifts poured forth with lavish hand at her dear feet; those gifts for which she gave again jewels as rich and rare.

Ralph was sitting in a low chair near the mantelshelf, his dark head resting against the woodwork where the goblins grinned and gambolled—the goblins that in his childish days had seemed to him almost like living things.

Hilda knelt beside her lover; her hands, clasped in his, were held against his breast; her eyes were dreamy and languorous as those of one who, waking from sleep to find herself surrounded by a world of new and beautiful delights and scenes, is almost ready to question if reality be real, if fancy does not masquerade as fact.

It is given to most of us once at least in our lives to come across an experience so terrible that it is hard, indeed, to realize its truth; to few perhaps is it granted to face a prospect so enthralling that the dazzled mind sees in its exquisite perfection something of the illusion of the mirage.

Hilda listening to the rushing of the river—Hilda dreaming of a troubled sea, among whose tossing breakers a fainting swimmer fights in vain for life, and now, Hilda kneeling by her dear love's side, her hands clasped in hi-,

her lips still tremulous from the passionate pressure of that first, sweet kiss—what a change is here!

From the silence of death to the throbbing pulse of life lived to its fullest—from the aching pain of loss to the glorious consciousness of possession.

"But, Hilda," said Ralph, rallying his darling with a loving irony. "I did not come to you, you came to me from under the shadow of the clematis—you came singing the old song you sang to-night."

At this allusion to the particularly lame musical performance of an hour ago, Hilda grew rosy, and, her hands being closely prisoned, hid her face against the nearest shelter—her lover's shoulder.

"It was cruel of me to make you sing it," he crooned in her ear, speaking as softly as though a listening world stood by. "I might have known——"

"You might have known I loved you too well to sing it through without breaking down," put in Hilda, lifting her face, beautiful in shame, from its hiding-place, but smiling as she scolded; "and you did know it—you know you did—and it was very mean of you, Master Ralph."

"Call me that again, and I will make you sing it all through, from beginning to end, every word of it, this very minute," said the person thus addressed, giving her a little loving shake.

"Well then, Ralph, an it please you so, sir? And now, confess, were you not cruel? Did you not know?"

"I was cruel, and I knew, but it was so sweet to hear your dear voice falter (as I knew it would), so sweet to silence it at last altogether—as I did! Will not my lady fair forgive me? Nay, do not turn your head away, Hilda. Tell me that you do not grudge me the gift you have given me to-night—the gift of your own sweet self to be my wife, my friend, my precious counsellor through life, my dear companion—all things in one. Sweetheart, kiss me of your own free will, and then I shall know myself a pardoned penitent."

She laid her arms about his neck, and lifted her happy mouth for the kiss that dropped upon it.

Then, when she could find her voice, she said:

"I will try to be all those beautiful things to you, and

more—God helping me. And, Ralph, I am not angry, but glad that you made me sing that dear old song—since it pleased you, dear!"

There was a pretty touch of wifely homage in her words and the look that accompanied them, that might well have touched any man's heart. To Ralph they brought a sobering sense of responsibility; a sudden perception of all a true woman gives when she gives her life into a man's hand, saying thereby, "Do with it as you will, it is yours to make or mar."

He folded his arm about Hilda's pliant form and drew her close to his heart. In his mind were solemn thoughts.

"God deal so with me as I with thee," he said in his heart, and a hush fell upon the two.

Outside, the river crooned softly to the night; its song of rhythmical monotones sounded to Hilda like a murmur of ineffable content, the very outcome of a restfulness that was complete, and could know no torturing or disturbing dreams.

How changed was that voice in her ears since the time when its rush and sullen flow seemed the dirge of a young life ended—the coronach of a home made desolate!

Overhead the orange tints were dying, and the pallid purple shades of night grew. Yet daylight lingered as though the summer world were far too fair to be left willingly, and the moon that overhung the pine woods as yet shone but faintly, while her attendant star was no more than a tiny flickering point of light.

And Hilda, hushed in the hush of the gloaming, at rest within the shelter of her lover's arms, bethought her of the shrine of which she was a votary, of the service of love to which her life was vowed, of the shadows that beset her pathway, of the darkest shadow of all, and as she thought she sighed.

She had been so happy—poor Hilda!—in this last golden hour, that she would fain have forgotten the existence of sorrow as an element of life in the abstract, and of her own life in the concrete.

"What is it, sweetheart?" asked Ralph, stirred into electric sympathy by the tremor of that gentle sigh.

Ralph," said Hilda, freeing herself from the girdle of

his arm, rising to her feet, standing before him, slender, yet resolute, with something of pleading in her attitude and voice, yet much of courage too. "Ralph, there is something I must say."

"Is there?" he answered, looking up at her in the soft, grey light, and thinking that her beauty, painted on the dusk, showed all the fairer for its sombre canvas; "say it, then. I am not afraid to hear anything you have to say."

Yet, for all these brave and loving words of his, there was a tremble in Hilda's voice as she did his bidding.

"I could never leave mothie. You would not ask me, dear, would you? because you know all I am to her; you have seen it day by day; but yet I do not love you less, loving her so much—rather more, for all my thoughts and fears for her will now be shared by you. I shall show you all my heart about her, keeping nothing back."

In the expansive and delightful frame of mind in which Ralph Stirling found himself at the present juncture, his faith in the large-mindedness of humanity was unbounded; his blind trust and confidence in Lady Boscawen knew no limits. The place that Hester Devenant was to occupy in the glorious future now dawning for himself and Hilda was no longer a misty blur on that mental picture. It was defined in perfect harmony with the rest.

The (social) arms of the lady of Earl's Cragg were to embrace, not only Hilda, but Hilda's mother. Nurse Prettyman would lighten his darling's cares and duties. But here some slight misgiving came over Ralph. He put back the dark locks from his brow with that gesture that was so like the dead father, and at sight of which poor old Anthony's eyes were ever ready to twinkle tearfully. There had been certain signs in Mrs. Prettyman of ill-will towards the widow of Gabriel Devenant—signs that had not made much impression upon Ralph at the time, but that now recurred to him somewhat unpleasantly. Of course women would fall out with one another. It was a way they had. Doubtless there had been petty feminine jealousies when Mrs. Devenant was at the Dale. And no one—not even a man who was passionately and intensely in love with her daughter Hilda—could look upon Mrs. Devenant as other than a woman of an irritable and trying temper, whose

sorrows and trials had embittered instead of softening her nature.

To no one had Hester shown to better advantage than to the young squire of Dale End since his return from death to life—from a far-distant land to his own lonely home; and yet even Ralph quickly understood what a hard woman she was to live with, and his heart swelled within him as he realized that his darling's daily life was as a pathway set with thorns.

And yet, to have come between this mother and daughter—these two who seemed so strangely isolated from all other ties of kindred or of friendship—would have taken the guise of a sin in his eyes. He would sooner strengthen and support Hilda in doing what was right, than lead her to a wrongful and cowardly life of restfulness. Besides, as has been said before, though doubtful how far he could answer for Mrs. Prettyman, he was full of confidence in Lady Boscawen, and trusted that others would be led by her, and that in the end Mrs. Devenant might be weaned from her morbid and unhealthy love of a solitude devoted to dwelling upon a bitter past. So should she be a light and not a shadow in the home that was to be Hilda's and his.

These thoughts flashed through his mind as Hilda—a gracious figure in the mellow gloom, her daffodil-coloured gown showing white, the violet iris at her throat matching her eyes—spoke of "mothie" with a tremble in her voice.

When she had said her say, and waited—drawing her breath a little quickly—for his reply, he took her hand, and, with a gentle chivalry that well became him, raised it to his lips, holding it there a moment or so before he let it go. And Hilda knowing all the meaning of that mute caress, and that she and "mothie" were to be given over to Ralph's dear keeping—together, not apart—loved him with a deeper and completer love than ever, if that were possible, for mothie's sake.

"My love," she said, "my love!" and as he rose, and, standing by her side, clasped his arm about her shoulders, Hilda turned and touched his hand with her lips, the while a little sob of mingled joy and pride and passionate tenderness told how deeply she was stirred. "I have stayed away from her too long as it is," she said, speaking rather breath-

lessly in her sudden fit of self-reproach; "I have been so happy, that I have forgotten all the world except you, Ralph; I will go now and tell her all my happy news."

She flitted through the dusk that was rapidly silvering into moonlight, leaving him alone with his own thoughts, or rather misgivings; for, the spell of her immediate presence removed, misgivings crowded on him thick and fast.

He remembered Davie, who, from being an ever-welcome friend, had apparently all at once presented himself to Mrs. Devenant's mind as a would-be robber and an enemy. Would a like fate overtake himself? If so, how best should he shield Hilda from trouble, and yet yield not one inch in his resolve to claim her as his wife before the world—his by the divine right of the love she bore him, and of the love and reverence he gave to her?

"Nothing shall part us, nothing!" he muttered to himself as he paced impatiently up and down the room, across whose floor a broad strip of moonlight came shimmering through the open casement.

And, as he chafed and fought with many windmills in the form of possible obstacles to his desires, Hilda came stealing to his side like a dear little ghost, slipping her hand under his arm, and pacing by his side to and fro, to and fro, along that glorified track of light that seemed a fitting pathway for those whose hearts were bright with hope and love.

"She is still asleep," said Hilda, speaking softly, as people are apt to do in the moonlight: "I covered her feet with a shawl, and lighted the lamp, so that she might not wake in the dark. The moon is not shining in at her window as it is here. Poor mothie! she looks so tired and worn, Ralph, when she is sleeping. It is only then that you really see how worn she is, and when she wakes she says the strangest things sometimes, or rather she says them in her sleep, over and over again, until she wakes."

"What things, Hilda?"

"Strange things; and do you know, I sometimes fancy that Davie was not always kind to her."

"Davie not kind to her? I cannot fancy Davie anything but kind and tender to every suffering creature on God's earth."

"Nor I, and that is what troubles me. I seem to be

doing him a cruel wrong, and yet his name is for ever on my mother's lips. Sometimes I wake with the sound ringing in my ears, 'Davie, Davie, do not call me that, anything but that; not that, not that!' Ah, it is pitiful to hear her, how she will moan, while you can see the great beads of sweat standing on her forehead, and her hands twist and turn like those of one in dreadful pain."

"Hilda, it must be some fancy that has taken possession of her mind, some perverted notion that clings to her, and will not be cast aside; it cannot have any ground in truth."

"No, no," said Hilda, clinging closely to her lover's arm, and trembling as she still kept pace with him. "No, it cannot be a real thing that haunts her so, and yet how terrible and real it seems at the time!—'Not that, not that; anything but that!'—I tell you the cry lingers in my ears, pierces to my heart. I start from my sleep even when all is quiet, fancying that I hear it still. When you told me the other evening that you had heard from Davie, and that he was coming home—I trembled; for I did not know what effect his coming might have upon her—she seems to fear and hate him so — he who was once her friend and mine——"

"Did you tell her what I had said?"

"No, nor did you name it in her presence; and yet—I feel sure she knows of his coming."

"Why, dear?"

"Because the other night, in her restless sleep, she broke into a strange and startled cry—'Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?' pointing with her outstretched hand, as if to some phantom shape, visible to her eyes alone; and then came the old wailing lament—'anything but that—anything but that.'"

Hilda trembles as she speaks, pressing closer and closer to her lover's side, as though there, and there alone, were safety and comfort to be found.

"Does she walk in her sleep then?" says Ralph, holding the girl's hand firmly in his own so that she may feel conscious of his nearness to her, his oneness with her alike in all sorrow and in all joy.

"Yes; not often, but yet often enough to make me never at rest about her. Sometimes she will talk about my—my

father, about his terrible death, fancy she is hunting him along the roads and down by the dykes, but oftenest it is Davie—Davie pursuing her with some horrible threat and accusation.

"Accusation?"

"Yes; for once, as I was following her, afraid to wake her lest some evil should befall her, she fell forward on her knees, put up her hands as if to shield herself from something infinitely dreaded, and cried out, 'Not that, Davie, not that—there is no blood upon my hands!' And then she shrank down upon the ground, moaning and crying, and I—oh, Ralph—it was terrible! It is, may be, wrong to tell you all these things.—I have borne them in silence. I have told them to no one—no one. I have kept it all hidden, even from the servants in the house; but now is it wrong, dear, to tell you how my heart is breaking for her? Mothie, mothie!"

Gathering her closely to him, Ralph leads her to the low, wide window-seat in the hollow of the casement. A perfect flood of silver light is filtering down upon river and tree, kissing the little ripples as they pass and tipping every branch with silver leaves. And now this gracious stream of radiance falls on Hilda's pale and troubled face; on eyes not tearful, but full of fear and sadness: on lips so pallid that her lover's kisses hotly showered upon those faded roses hardly woo life and colour back again.

She lies back within the shelter of his arms; his hand, with gentle, caressing touch, passes over and over her wealth of ruffled nut-brown locks.

He soothes her as a mother soothes a sick or frightened child. He is tender as a woman, strong as a man. He is brother, lover, both in one, and so her terror passes; and, at last, a little trembling smile dances about her mouth. She puts up her hand to his hair. She laughs a laugh that is soft and low, and half of tears. "How good you are—how good!" she says; "sorrow can never do me much harm—while I have you."

After this they are both silent a while. They might well gaze at the beauty of the night, since no fairer surely ever shone; but to gaze at each other is just now to them the sweeter pastime.

So they take their fill of looking, and Hilda has smiled more than once, though her cheek is still pale, and her eyes wistful.

All at once she starts. A shadow has come between them and the moonlight—a shadow falls upon them as they sit there, side by side, and hand in hand, plighted and happy lovers.

The shadow is Hester Devenant's. Her face shines ghostly in its pallor as the moonlight touches it. Her eyes, dark and menacing, are fixed on Ralph.

But Hilda sees none of these things.

She kneels up upon the window-seat, stretching impatient, loving hands out into the beauteous night, clasping the shawl that hangs about her mother's shoulders, and laying her soft cheek lovingly against its folds.

"Oh, mothie, mothie!" she cries, "come in; the dew is falling, dear. You should not have gone out, indeed you should not; I thought you were still asleep; I was afraid to wake you, for you slept so ill last night—but now come in. Bless me and kiss me, dear—am I not your child? . . . . Is not my joy yours? . . . . And, mothie, listen . . . . if joy could kill, then I should die to-night!"

Here her voice breaks—stifled by happy tears.

But Hester's eyes never stir from Ralph Stirling's face.

She might be dead for all the heed she takes of Hilda's tender pleading.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE ACCUSATION.

Wearied after a night of unrest, followed by a sultry, exhausting day, Hester Devenant, lulled by the cool of evening and the drowsy dusk of the gloaming, had fallen into a deep sleep—for a while into a restful one. But dreams came at last—phantoms as stirring as though they had been realities.

Once more in her fevered fancy she knelt among the

king-cups by the big dyke; once more a dead white face rose from oozy depths; once more the water parted to let that ghastly thing pass out into the fitful gleaming of the night.

How real—how real it all was to that troubled sleeper! Her mental vision, watching each detail of the grisly drama, as the ear might follow each note of a melody known by heart, seemed to catch the glistening shimmer of the drops that fell from the dead man's hair, to note the circles widening and expanding on the ruffled surface of the dyke to die in little sobs among the sedges.

As the living horror of her dreams grew, deep sighs trembled through her parted lips, her face twitched, her hands worked, and so at last the depth and passion of her anguish woke her. Drawing her breath heavily and with difficulty, and pushing back from her brow the thick grey locks that were dank and heavy with sweat, she sat staring at vacancy.

She was conscious of a strange stifling sensation and a great longing for air—more air—some sweet, fresh wind from heaven to blow aside these clinging memories and horrible visions of sleep.

Hastily putting aside the covering that Hilda's loving hands had laid across her feet, Hester rose, swayed a moment as she stood, and then passed out into the balmy sweetness of the night.

Once out in the soft, silver shower of the moonlight, she stood a moment listening to the murmur of the river, to the gentle rustle of the welcome breeze that went creeping in and out among the branches, and then another sound caught her ear—the murmur of voices soft and low as those of Jessica and her Lorenzo in that night when the fair moon made all things bright as were their own full hearts.

Hester crossed to the widely-opened casement. Her dress rustled, bending the grasses as she passed; but lovers' ears are sometimes deaf to all save lovers' sighs. And so it came about that the shadow that fell upon the clasped hands was the first intimation to Ralph and Hilda that their solitude *à deux* was invaded.

Then came that joyous cry from Hilda, as with outstretched hands she prayed to "mothie" to come and bless

her happy child—a cry that seemed to startle the quiet of the night; a new note of rapture among its gentle harmonies—a cry that met with no response, a note that awoke no answering echo!

Hester was silent. Her sombre eyes grew to the face of him in whom she saw the living likeness of one that had passed away to the silent land, carrying with him the burden of his sorrow and his sin.

With eager, happy haste Hilda sought her mother's side, caught her hand, and held it close as she led her in from among the fluttering leaf-shadows.

She was so stirred and shaken out of her usual self by this new-found joy of hers, so full of fondest utterances of love and care for "mothie," that Ralph could do little else save look and listen, biding his time to act as his own counsel and plead his own cause.

His keener, calmer sight saw what was as yet hidden from Hilda's dazzled eyes. Dire and sinister misgivings filled his mind, fears unspeakable arrayed themselves before him, all pointing to possible trouble coming to that dear heart that had but now throbbed against his own.

But let what hot, impatient thoughts there might toss in his heart, Ralph had no choice save silence for a while, since Mrs. Devenant, ignoring Hilda's tender agitation and his own restrained excitement, summoned the servant, ordered the lamp to be brought in, and would have had the moonlight shut out but for Hilda's entreaty.

Ralph was ready to denounce Hester as selfish and cruel. In reality she was only gaining time. The influence of that dream—so terribly real in its unreality—was about her still; her nerves were vibrating; there was the sound as of the sobbing ripples of disturbed waters in her ears.

She wanted to be calm and self-possessed before entering upon a terrible conflict; she wanted time. But now that interval of respite was passed. The lamp, with its wide-spread, rosy-tinted shade, made a ruddy moonlight of its own, rivalling the paler one outside; the maid-servant had returned to the interrupted delights of a rustic flirtation.

Restraint could be kept up no longer. Hilda was kneeling by her mother's knee. Ralph, pleading his dear love's cause and his own, displayed no lack of eloquence. He craved the

place of a son in the heart of Hilda's mother. Hitherto she had known the love of one heart only; henceforth there would be two to care for her. Could she trust him with her dearest treasure? Did she question the height, and depth, and strength of his love for the woman he coveted for his wife, the dear companion of his life, the sharer of his aims and hopes, the secret inspirer of all that should be best and brightest in the golden years to come? Let her put him and his love to the test, let her think of something hard to do, and bid him do it for Hilda's sake; then she would see if he were worthy of the great and beautiful gift he begged of her.

Hester raised her eyes to his loving, earnest face, the face of the man that looked at her with the eyes of Geoffrey Stirling, that spoke to her with the voice of Geoffrey Stirling.

"Would you, indeed, do so much for Hilda's sake?" she said.

"Try me," he answered, tossing back his hair with the old, familiar gesture, looking her and the world proudly in the face, conscious of the wealth of love in his beating heart—the love that could never swerve, or fail, or change.

Putting Hilda gently but firmly from her, Hester rose from her chair, stood confronting the man who had asked for a son's place in her heart, and would have spoken, but that for the moment something impeded her utterance.

She had been foiled once by grim death himself. She had thirsted for vengeance through the long and arid years, and, when the longed-for cup had but touched her lips, a skeleton hand had grasped it, dashed it to the ground, cast it in fragments at her feet. Now, once more her eager, trembling lips almost touched its brim, now no bony clutch should wrest it from her. She would drink and be satisfied.

It was not pity that held Hester tongue-tied. Perhaps in all her life she had hardly known what pity was. True she had pitied Gabriel, her husband, as he lay heavy with the heaviness of death upon her breast, staring heavenwards, with sightless eyes; but the pity had been more for herself than for him, even then—in that she suffered so acutely in the loss of what she had loved. It was not pity that held her silent, but rather an exultation so passionate that it climbed in her throat like poor Lear's sorrow, choking her.

Wax-white was her cheek, pallid were her lips, but in her

eyes burnt a hot and sombre fire, and the hand that rested on the mantelshelf was clenched.

"Try me," said Ralph again, half-laughing as he spoke, exultant in his knowledge of his own heart, and of Hilda's.

"Well, then—for Hilda's sake—give up all these hopes of yours, Ralph Stirling; trample them under foot. Kiss her if you will; I will grant you so much grace; and then—see her face no more."

At this, Hilda, who had, still kneeling, been looking up at her mother as one who listens for a longed-for word of greeting, sprang to her feet and to her lover's side, clasping her hands about his arm, and gazing wildly in his face as one who would say, "Do not heed her, she knows not what she says."

The darkest shadow of all was over Hilda now; the terrible dread that had many a time and oft come upon her in the dead, dark hours of the night, was staring in her face, a gruesome, fearsome thing that chilled her blood, and stayed the beating of her heart. Ralph cast his arm about her, drawing her closely to his breast. He looked down upon her upturned face, fondly, proudly, with an exquisite smile of absolute trust and devotion.

Then, still smiling, he looked at Hester.

"Why should I give up Hilda?" he said.

The hand upon the mantelshelf was clenched till it shook with the tension. Hester's lips shook so that they scarce could frame the words that strove to pass their trembling portal.

"Because it is not for you, Geoffrey Stirling's son, to ask any honest woman to be your wife—least of all Gabriel Devenant's daughter."

Ralph fell back a pace before her words as if they had been blows, staring at the fierce and pitiless beauty of her face with wide and wondering eyes.

Was she mad—this woman who dared to utter his father's name coupled with some shadowy accusation of dishonour—this woman who bade him give up all his best and highest hopes because no honest woman might link her lot with his?

Hilda, still clinging to him with loving, restraining arms, moaned out a prayer to have some pity, to be gentle—very gentle with poor mothie.

But Ralph was past gentleness or pity either. In his ears no name was so sacred as that of the father he had loved—the father who had died, mourning him as one dead—died, hungering for the touch of his hand and the sound of his voice.

"If this is some sorry jest, some jugglery to test my love for Hilda, I pray you say no more. There are wounds so deep that they cannot bear even the lightest touch."

Thus spoke Ralph, his breath coming in the quick gasps of strong and sudden excitement, his manly cheek pallid as Hester's own.

"It is no sorry jest, no jugglery," she answered, and her voice rang high and clear. "You are the son of a robber, a liar, a cheat, a murderer."

With a strangled cry of bitter rage and pain, Ralph fell back from Hester Devenant as though she were some pestilential thing, whom all men alike must hate and fly from.

"My God!" he said, sobbing with passion as he spoke, "that I should live to hear such words, and let those live who utter them!"

"Ralph, Ralph, have pity! Oh, my love, she knows not what she says. She knows not what she says. . . ."

Thus Hilda, beside herself, pleading for pity, betrayed the secret terror of her life.

But none heeded.

She had slipped from Ralph's hold, and stood beside her mother, white and wan, yet full of tender courage.

"Come," she said, "mothie, come and rest. Say no more now. Nothing shall be let to vex you, dear. Come!"

Hester laughed aloud.

"Poor fool!" she said, clutching the girl's wrist and putting her roughly aside; "she would rather think her mother mad than believe her lover the wretched thing he is. Listen," she continued, pointing at Ralph, who, regarding her fixedly, fought for self-command, "listen to more words of truth, and wonder more and more that you live to hearken to them, or let me live who speak them. Do what you will; only listen, and I care not what you do. Your father, Geoffrey Stirling, robbed the bank. He was the hero of that oft-told tale. He drove Gabriel Devenant to a shame-

ful death, made me a widow and my child fatherless. I cursed him living and I cursed him dead, and now the curse is on your head, the blight is on your heart. He died, confessing his guilt, crying aloud for mercy, praying God to give him time—time—only time, and he would strive to repair the past. He cried out that the tears of the widow and the orphan were searing his heart, that ill-gotten gold was dragging him down to hell. I tell you he confessed—confessed—but only what I had known through all the long and weary years."

A strange change had come over Ralph. He looked, moved, and spoke as one actuated by some power outside himself.

"If you believed these things, if you believed my dearest father to be a robber and a murderer, in that his sin drove your husband to his death, how is it that you ever touched my hand, or let my foot cross your threshold? How could you bear to see me by your daughter's side, to greet me as you have done, almost tenderly?"

Hester came close up to her antagonist; she smiled in his face.

"I was foiled once; death came, and, in the game I played, I lost. Now, I have won! We are told that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children, and now you must suffer for your father's sin, and I shall see you suffer."

"Who is the liar—who is the Judas now?" said Ralph, speaking as one who has little choice of the words he utters: "you have lived a lie to me, with all these bitter thoughts seething in your heart. You have lured me on, you have betrayed me with kindness—you have been a Judas to me!"

"Who told you to say that to me?" said Hester, fiercely, nervously clutching at her sleeve; "you have been comparing notes, you and——"

Ralph interrupted her.

"I have been comparing notes with no one. I speak of these fancies of yours about my father, as if they were facts, to humour you. To you they have been facts, and you have been false to me."

"You do not believe what I say?"

Hester hissed the words through her teeth.

Ralph laughed softly.

"Words to be believed must be proved," he said, "else they are but empty things."

As he spoke, such a change had come over the face of the woman he confronted as startled even him, wrapped as he was in that unnatural calm that is often the outcome of a terrible strain.

She stared fixedly at something beyond him; her jaw dropped; she staggered back against the mantelshelf.

The door behind Ralph had opened softly, but he had not heard it, possessed as he was by a supreme excitement of nerve and feeling that rendered him blind and deaf to all else. Now, at sight of Hester's changing face he turned. Then, hand to hand, eye to eye, two, long parted, faced each other.

"Master Ralph—Master Ralph!"

"Davie—dear old Davie!"

And Hilda with a glad cry flung herself upon Davie's neck.

He was no longer to her a man who had loved, and loved in vain. He was help when help was most sorely needed; he was the good angel whose advent was as that of one sent straight from Heaven.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DAVIE IS SILENT.

DAVIE, covering Hilda's clasped hands with his own, held them firmly and tenderly, as might a mother those of a frightened child.

He glanced sharply from one to the other of the strange group before him.

Then a challenge seemed to pass from him to Hester, for his keen grey eyes met hers, flashing as the steel blade flashes when drawn upon an enemy, while hers were fixed, gloomy, defiant, darkening in their deep orbits with a sombre fire. He drew a long breath, as he clasped his hands more tightly upon Hilda's.

"I have come too late then!" he said, with despairing passion in his look and voice. "You have been playing the Judas again, only this time with a difference." Then he bent towards the white quivering face near his shoulder, and his voice shook with tender pity. "Hilda," he crooned, "Hilda, my poor child, take courage!"

"I will," she answered, nerved by his words to a new strength; "and you, Davie, you will help me and Ralph—you will tell him what you know to be the truth, that she, my dearest mother, knows not what she says."

The words were almost whispered in his ear, yet Hester caught them.

"One calls me Judas—the other says I am mad. Ralph Stirling, to which opinion will you say amen?"

But Ralph took no heed of this appeal. He seemed as one dazed and dumb. With one hand he grasped the mantel, the other strained back the hair from his temple. His face was white as that of a statue, his lips, set in hard lines, looked as though, never more in all the world, should they soften to the marvellous sweet smile that had been the sunshine of his father's troubled life.

His ears had listened to a torrent of horrible blasphemy against the dead, listened without one shadow of credence to a ghastly and terrible slander of the one name on earth dearest to him.

Do we not all know that no sin is so hard to forgive as the utterance of a cruel word anent our dead—that to slander the living seems but a venial fault beside so black a treachery? Surely then it is easy to conceive the storm of feeling roused in Ralph's mind by Hester's malediction of Geoffrey his father.

The bitter ordeal had been all the harder to bear, because it came hurrying upon the heels of an hour so pure and holy, so exquisite in its idyllic and passionate content, that it seemed to rend and desecrate a thing most sacred and beautiful.

Nevertheless the might of his love for Hilda had taught him a certain forbearance and gentleness towards the utterer of things that would have been the basest of lies, but that they were to him only the grim fancies of a mad woman. In taking that dear gift of Hilda's love had he not taken all

herself, her joys and sorrows, fears and trials too? Should he shrink from sharing with her to the full, even this, the cruellest and bitterest that could well blight a young life, and sadden a young heart?

For now he had suddenly been brought face to face—so he thought—with a family skeleton, a ghastly presence, with which Hilda, his love, so gentle and so brave, had been dwelling in the tents year by year, until the fearful thing had grown familiar to her: a thing to be hidden from all eyes by the sacred mantle of a daughter's love, faced with the resolute endurance of an absolute devotion.

These thoughts had flashed through his mind like lightning across a stormy sky; had given him patience; had taught him some forbearance towards the woman who was Hilda's mother.

He had even repented him of those few hot words that had escaped him in the heat and amaze of Hester's unlooked-for denunciation of the cherished dead.

But now there was something in Davie's face, something in Davie's cry of bitter regretfulness, "then I have come too late," something in the challenge that had shot from Davie's eyes to Hester's and from Hester's back again, that made him fear he knew not what.

What this strange and horrible drama, in which he found himself an actor, one that had been played before? Had other ears than his been assailed by foul slanders of one whose voice was silent in death?

Was there some method in this madness? Did base and horrible design lurk where he had fancied only strange delusions, and the wild distorted thoughts of a morbid and disordered mind?

Almost it seemed to Ralph Stirling as though he were himself a phantom among phantoms, the sport and jest of some dread vision of the night. He stood amid surroundings dear and familiar, full of associations of an unforgotten past. By that hearth how often had he seen his father smile to bid his boy good-night! Near that casement, he could recall the "pretty mother" of his boyhood, sitting where the sunbeam, streaming in, touched her fair locks to gold.

Who could have foretold, in those past days, that such

a scene as this should desecrate the room made holy by a thousand tender memories?

Pale and bewildered, Ralph stood staring at Davie, who in his turn watched Hester, while Hilda's streaming eyes were on her lover's face, and every breath she drew was half a sob.

Hester, having put that mocking question to the man whose heart she was tearing with her bitter words, as the hawk with claw and talon tears it prey, waited to see what he would answer.

But Ralph said nothing to her; never turned his head towards her; never looked upon her; hardly seemed to hear her.

Why had Davie been so harsh to her, he was thinking; why had he called her—a Judas? Was that the way to treat one who knew not what she said?

"Which are you ready to say amen to—which?" said Hester again.

She spoke imperiously, as might an empress to an unreasonable and rebellious subject. The colour was mounting to her cheeks, the fire to her eyes; the beauty long since dead and buried, the beauty of life and light and colour was rising from its grave, in the likeness which it had worn when its spell led Gabriel captive among the hay-scented meadows.

"Well, since you are dumb," she continued, with a harsh and strident laugh, "listen to me once again—mad or wicked—be I which I may—you owe me a hearing. You bade me try you—put your love for Hilda to the test. I have done so. Give her up, resign all claim to her. How can my daughter wed the man whose father's sin drove her own father to his death?"

"Peace, woman!" shrieked Davie, putting Hilda away, and striding to Ralph's side. "You will kill him; you will drive him mad!"

"That would be tit for tat, indeed," said Hester with a smile.

The silence that followed seemed to be rent by the pitiful sound of each shuddering breath that heaved Ralph's breast. As he who of old strove with beasts at Ephesus, so did he now wrestle with himself.

Nor vainly. The sweat stood dank and glistening on his brow, the muscles round about his mouth worked and twitched, but he spoke calmly enough when he forced his voice.

"Hush!" he said, laying his hand on Davie's arm; "be gentle with her, Davie, she knows not what she says."

Hester hearing, turned upon him fiercely.

"I know not what I say. I am mad—the victim of mad fancies, vain delusions, am I? Well, then, listen to the story of my madness, listen to all it has taught me."

But Davie was by her side, grasping her hands as though they were held in a vice.

"In God's name hold your peace now! As you hope for mercy yourself, show mercy—now!"

His voice thrilled through the room, and seemed to go trembling out into the radiance beyond. He might as well have striven to stem with his hand the flow of the river, whose low murmur sang in the moonlight, as strive to stay Hester with that passionate appeal.

"In God's name," she echoed, "give to Geoffrey Stirling's son the message his dying father committed to you. Death cut the word across, but what was the one word wanting? What was the words that died upon a dead man's lips? 'Tell Ralph to make——' then came the death-rattle, and the last trembling breath; but you and I, Davie, knew what the last word was, as well as though it had been spoken—'Tell Ralph to make—reparation!' and you have been unfaithful, you that vowed such fealty to the master you professed to love have proved yourself a traitor."

As the word "traitor" left Hester's lips, the brain-lethargy that had wrapped Ralph round like a thick garment, muffling the voices of those about him to his ear, and stretching like a veil across his vision, seem to break and clear.

There was something—some terrible, some monstrous misunderstanding underlying all this war of words—something more than the mere ravings of a mad-woman, since others beside Hester Devenant had part and lot in it.

What was this halting message from that solemn death-bed, of which Cuthbert Deane had told him but the mutilated story? What was this solemn charge to make reparation? Why had he not heard of it before?

"What did my dear father say? Tell me, Davie, keep nothing back," Ralph pleaded.

A sore wonder and amaze took possession of Hilda as she heard her lover speak thus, and read the agony in Davie's face as he listened.

Were these haunting phantoms, these delirious fancies, that had been in her eyes but as the hallucinations of an exalted brain, taking new and tangible form and shape? Was there some truth — some horrible, nay, impossible truth—in them, after all? If so, how should she best show to Ralph her entire sympathy, her nearness, in the cloud of thick darkness that was gathering about his head?

She moved to his side; her hand sought his, nestled there, and never shrank from the vice-like grasp of the cold fingers that crushed her own pitilessly.

So, in the "good old times," that must have been such very bad old times, before medical science knew of any anodyne for the anguish of the surgeon's knife, may hand have clasped hand fearlessly as nerve and flesh were severed.

For the iron was entering into Ralph's soul. What cared he for Hester Devenant's ravings. Had not all Becklington spoken of her as one not altogether accountable —one whose violent and undisciplined passions had held possession of her, even as of old demons inhabited human creatures, rending and tearing them at their will?

But the piteous appeal, the despairing pain of Davie's face, what did these things mean?

"He was not himself—wasn't my master. Master Ralph, dying tongues babble of strange things."

"Not himself!" cried Hester with mocking fury; "not himself! Say, rather, that after being a sham and a lie through 'all the long and weary years' (you remember, Davie, those were his very words—'the long and weary years'), he was his very self that night—the night in which he died. 'I do repent!' he cried; 'I do confess! Pray God I may find pardon and peace.' What did you answer? 'I am praying, master, with my whole heart.'"

What horrible mockery was this—this tale told by a mad woman? What were these words put into the mouth of a dying man? If those dear lips ever uttered such remorseful

prayers, such cries to God and man for mercy and forgiveness, then must the clouds of delirium have darkened the clear mind, then must lying devils have gained access to the failing brain. It could not be—it could not be—that there was any truth in what this cruel woman said!

Tighter, tighter grew Ralph's clutch upon his dear love's hand: closer, closer did Hilda gather her slender pliant body to his side.

Whatever had to be borne, let it be borne together.

"If you want a confirmation of the story I am telling," continued Hester fiercely, "look at your faithful henchman's face. I tell you, that through all the years—long and weary to me, too, God knows! as well as to the man I hated—he, Davie, was my tool. I won him to be my friend, day by day he came to me, and we spoke together on one well-beloved theme—his master. Never once did he come and go without adding some little thread to the net I was weaving. Little things he told me, little baits I threw, at which he nibbled, strengthened my plan, gave me new zest, hounded me on to stronger efforts."

"Did I not say well, that she had been a Judas to me?" broke out Davie, in a voice of anguish; "I, who would have died to serve the man to whom I owed all I had on earth—she turned me into a tool against him, she did more, she baited the hook with her daughter's love, the love that was not hers to give; she led me on, making me believe in what I hoped for. I tell you she has let me call her 'mother,' my lips have touched her hand, her cheek—I could curse them now for such caresses given to a traitress; but at the time I thought myself most blest; I saw in my heated fancy, Hilda my wife—her mother, mine; and so, unknowingly, I played my master false, telling this woman of his comings and his goings—for I loved to talk of him."

"And loved to write of him too," put in Hester, dominating Davie's voice with her own, and holding Ralph as by a spell, by her passion and resolve; "as you did when I was in Paris years ago; telling me of his wealth and greatness, and of how the hearts of the sad and suffering were cheered by his charities and his ready sympathy; have you forgotten how you used to open your heart to me, Davie? I have not.

You did not know, poor foolish boy—how should you, indeed?—that I had gone on a long and perilous journey to trace the history of—a lie! That I had visited Barbadoes, and there learnt—what I was sure of in my own mind before—that no relative of Geoffrey Stirling's ever lived, or ever died, among the cane-tracks. I spared no pains to find out how the so-called 'heritage' came into his hands. I tracked out its history step by step. I found that it had been put up for sale by the widow of the late owner;—that it had been purchased through a local broker for an agent in England: and that the purchase had been registered in the name of Geoffrey Stirling, of Dale End, Yorkshire. Of all this you knew nothing. But you know now, Davie, that these things are true, for when your master died you hurried out to Barbadoes; you gained permission from Master Ralph to sell the estate and wind up all the affairs belonging to it; you schemed to keep things quiet; never to let your master's son know that the old Uncle Daniel of whom he spoke with such gentle and surprised gratitude had no existence—save in his own crafty brain."

"If you knew these things to be so—if you suspected my father of so great a crime, why did you not accuse him openly?"

The voice that spoke was Ralph's, but, if those who heard had not seen also, they would not have known it for his.

"Aye, aye," cried Davie, lifting his haggard eyes to Ralph's and clutching his hands the one in the other, "that's what I told her on that fearful night—that night of which you've heard but half the story yet—mine's still to tell. An open enemy may be an honest soul—but what a crawling, creeping, most accursed thing is one who plays the Judas!"

"You are fools," said Hester, gathering about her shoulders the shawl that had fallen from them—"fools, both of you! If I had said my say, laid my heart bare, who would have been on my side—who would have lent a hand to help me prove the truth? If I had told of my husband's visit to this house, under whose roof we now stand; if I had told of his peering in at that very window through which

the moonlight now streams; if I had told of his angry threatening gestures as he fled the place, of his late wanderings the night before, of his telling me how he saw, himself unseen, a countryman—a man in a waggoner's frock and with a long red beard—how he saw the shadow of the slouched hat and shrouded form melt among these very trees that rustle as we are speaking—who would have believed me? Was not my husband dead—dead—dead? Had he lived—what then? He was mad. The people called him 'mad Gabriel!' Who would have heeded what he said? They have said the same of me since," she went on, a strange, troubled, wandering look coming over her face, her eyes glancing uneasily round; "and it may be that they say the truth; but I am not without a woman's wit and cunning. No, no! I was foiled once, but I will not be foiled again—not I! 'The sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children.' The sin of Geoffrey Stirling shall be visited heavily—heavily—'good measure pressed down, running over.'"

She cowered down in a low chair, muttering; glanced timorously out into the shadowy night; dragged her shawl close about her throat; turned, as if for warmth, to the hearth where no fire was. All her courage, all her daring, seemed to have died out for the moment, as the light of a lamp fades for lack of oil.

Fear held Hilda silent; a creeping horror was upon the other two. This mingling of strength and weakness, of wild declaiming and scared and fitful muttering, had something ghastly in it. It was a thing that those who saw and heard never forgot to their dying day.

Hilda, quitting her lover's side (wholly without misgiving that he should misconceive the action, so entire was her trust in the sympathy of thought and feeling that bound them the one to the other), knelt in sorrow and amaze beside her mother's knee, cast tender arms about her shoulders, cooed in her ear fond words of soothing, turning now and again a look of piteous pleading to the others, as who would say, "Bear with her gently, bear with her yet a little while!"

For a time Hester endured, without returning, these caresses. It may be doubted, indeed, if she were conscious

of them. Her dark brows were knit above her eyes that seemed to look beyond the present, and to be rather reading the story of her own heart than taking note of actual things around her.

All at once she turned and looked at Hilda, stirred uneasily beneath the circlet of her arms, unlinked that loving girdle, and pushed the girl aside.

"Once when you were a child," she said, "I took your doll from you, and you cosseted me like that to get it back again; now it is your lover you are crying for—your lover, the son of your father's murderer. I tell you my curse would be upon you, if you were Ralph Stirling's wife! I would curse you, Hilda, though you are the child that I once bore beneath my heart. But there will be no need—no need—now that he knows he will give you up, he will cast you aside, he will have done with you."

She spoke the last few sentences hoarsely, drawing her breath heavily between each. The strain and excitement were beginning to tell upon her fever-worn frame; yet in her eye was no relenting; in the pitiless set of her cruel mouth no sign of mercy. Vengeance, in "full measure, pressed down, running over," should be poured upon the son of her enemy. She had been foiled once—she would be foiled no more.

"He will have done with you—he will accept the test that I have laid upon him to show what his love is worth——"

"He will not give her up—he will not cast her aside!" cried Ralph, beside himself, and straightway he held out his arms, and that bonnie love of his nestled to his heart, like a bird that flies to its nest at eventide, fearing the long dark hours of the night.

Over her fair prone head, clasping her close and fast, as though never more to let her go, Ralph cast back in Hester's teeth the test that she had offered him.

"Listen," he said, and his voice shook with passion; "though every word of this most foul and monstrous calumny against the dead were true—though my dearest father were indeed the robber and the murderer you dare to call him—I would not yield up this dear love of mine, unless her own lips bade me go—even then I would only so far give her up as to hope for nothing at her hands, but still loving her, to live

faithful to her, and to die still holding her my dearest treasure. It is well that you should know the strength of the dear bonds you fain would tear asunder, the closeness of the tie you have the will, nay the power, to break—well you should know how closely Hilda's life is linked with mine, and mine with hers—well you should realise what maimed and broken things those lives would be, parted the one from the other."

"Maimed and broken!" she echoed, twining her hands about her knees. "Maimed and broken! What has mine been, and by whom? I tell you when I looked on my husband's dead face, gazed into the darkened eyes, that could never give me back one glance or look again, all the pity and the love in my nature died too. Since that night of terror I have lived for one thing only—vengeance. Once I thought I held it in my hand, but, as my fingers closed upon it, it escaped me. I should be a fool to let it pass twice, shouldn't I?"

She looked up sharply in his face, as she put the question to him, and there in the eyes that were so like his father's she saw the lustrous sheen of tears.

Something in that sight confused and troubled her.

She glanced at Davie, standing still as any statue, with his eyes fixed on Master Ralph, his arms folded across his chest. She knew this enforced quiet to be but the calm before the storm. She had broken the promise wrung from her unwilling lips by David Robin upon the night that Geoffrey Stirling died; a promise given in the presence of an awful though silent witness. She would have to pay the cost of her unfaithfulness. She had been willing to risk all to satiate the lust of vengeance in her heart. She had been willing to sink the ship, and sink with it.

But now, just for the moment, some strange misgivings came over her; a hungry sorrow gnawed at her heart; a haunting fear that had more than once beset her, one that she had cast aside, refusing to dwell upon its sad pathetic face and dim regretful eyes, came back clothed in new and vivid colours. Nor could she drive it forth. She had weakened and distorted the powers of her mind by years of morbid, maddening dwelling upon one absorbing train of thought. She had lost all self-control, all possibility of self-

discipline. This step towards the madhouse had Hester Devenant taken long ago—that her thoughts led her, not she them. They were as wild, unmanageable steeds dragging her whither they would.

And now when she wanted to be clear and concise, when she aimed at setting his father's sin clearly and cleverly before the eyes of Ralph Stirling, she could not tear her thoughts from the dear, sweet days of old, when Gabriel, her husband, loved her; nor could she hold them back from wandering on to the days when something very like the aching of a broken heart told her that that love was dead.

This brave young lover of Hilda's could weep—so mighty was the love he bore her—at the mere thought and fancy of her loss; while she, Hester Devenant, had but plucked the fair fruit of tenderness to see it fall from her hand, and lie trodden among those withered leaves, her dead and blighted hopes.

"I should have won him back in time," she said, speaking more to herself than to others. "I should have won him back if I had spoken soft and sweet to him as in the olden days. He would have turned to me again, I know he would. I was twice robbed—robbed of the present, and of the future that might have been. The devil has often taunted me with the thought that I wore out his love—that all his gentleness was only toleration—that he was silent when I rated at him, only because he did not care for what I said any longer—but I tell you I should have won him back in time; I should have done it—he had a sweet, forgiving nature, had Gabriel, but he was done to death—done to death—done to death."

Those who listened in sore amaze and wonderment, lacking the clue to her words, saw her smite her hands together in an anguish of despair and longing, yet knew not what new madness might possess her.

Hilda, swaying from her lover's hold, bent down and gazed upon her mother's face with streaming, frightened eyes. In Ralph's shone the divine light of pity. Davie alone was stern and unmoved.

CHAPTER XXIX.

DAVIE SPEAKS.

After a moment or two of awful silence, as though subtly conscious of Davie's immobility—conscious of there being one creature present whom she could neither bend to her will nor sway by her passion—Hester looked across her shoulder at that still and silent figure by the closed door.

The ghastly pallor of his face was not observable, since the ruddy shade from the lamp gave it an unreal glow; but the downcast eyes, the knitted brow, the folded arms, all these things spoke to Hester Devenant of a day of reckoning near at hand, and the knowledge tortured her.

Why should Davie have appeared upon the scene just at this particular juncture? Why should his meddlesome hand mar her well-laid schemes? If he had bided where he was just a little while longer all would have been well. Now, who could say whether he might not meet plot with counter-plot?

She was not given to cowardice, God knew, and yet her heart harboured something very like fear of this simple creature—this "weakling"—this man whom other men spoke of with the gentleness that is born of pity, because there was "summat wrong wi' Davie"—this kinless thing that had been picked up in the street—a mere waif and stray—a castaway, reared on the charity of fools.

How she loathed and despised herself for acknowledging this influence—this mean trembling dread. How she loathed the man who inspired it, and who had now crossed her path when she least wanted him.

"I was more faithful than you," she said, hissing the words out fiercely—"more faithful by far than you, who professed such love for your master."

She had lost the softer mood in which she had moaned over Gabriel's lost love, and the possible future of which Geoffrey Stirling's sin had robbed her. Then the woman in her held the mastery, now the fiend was uppermost.

"I was more faithful to my trust than you to yours," she said again, willing to goad Davie into speech.

"Were you?" he answered, and once more the grey eyes flashed a challenge to the black.

She winced beneath that glance, and, when she spoke again, looked up at Ralph, not round at Davie.

"There was a chain about your father's neck, and by it hung a golden coin. 'If you are near me when I die,' he said, 'see that it is buried with me. It has lain here—here on my heart—all these long and weary years.' I was faithful in that—faithful in that. I met the vicar as I was going down the avenue, and I told him that the little golden coin was to be left upon the heart that beat no more."

"My God! my God! what torment is this that I am being dragged through!" cried Ralph, the plaint ending in a hoarse inarticulate moan. "Why was I not there to hear those precious words—to garner them up in my heart for ever? Why did he send me from him, to bear his burden of sorrow—be it what it might—alone?"

"Ask him!" said Hester, pointing at Davie with scornful finger; "or, since he is tongue-tied, shall I speak for him? 'Tell him that it wasn't want of love made me send him away so often, but that I feared his innocent eyes, and his loving ways; tell him I craved for him, as the thirsty crave for water. Tell him that I have confessed.'"

Hester spoke as one who from constant mental repetition runs a sentence off by heart. She spoke slowly and deliberately, willing that each separate word should sink into the heart she sought to wound.

Ralph turned a long, agonised, reproachful look on David Robin.

And Davie's silence was broken, his calmness shattered.

"Master Ralph—Master Ralph, come away from out this cursed house," he cried, stretching forth pleading hands, speaking with trembling lips. "I will tell you all and everything you like to ask. I will keep nothing back. Only come—come out from the presence of the woman who hunted your father to his death—who would hunt you down, too, because you are your father's son."

From one to the other Ralph gazed in wonder and despair. The deep waters were overwhelming him; the sorrows of death were compassing him about. But a slender hand clung to his, and in that clinging pres-

sure the possibility of all strength and endurance seemed to lie.

"Go with Davie—oh, my darling, go!" whispered Hilda's voice in his ear; her warm breath fanned his cheek.

In all the misery and desolation, all the cruel bitter uncertainty, all the blinding cloud of fears that beset him, his only sense of comfort lay in her nearness and her sympathy.

Hilda still believed her mother to be the victim of wild and morbid fancies. She imagined that she now possessed the secret of those stormy interviews that had taken place between Hester and Davie in the past, as well as of her mother's dread of the man who had once been her closest friend. She interpreted Davie's silence now to mean a delicate restraint put upon himself for her own sake and Master Ralph's.

His efforts to get Ralph to leave the house appeared to her under the same aspect. Besides, it wrung her heart to see her lover suffer so. She longed to throw her arms about him, to lead him forth into the quiet shadowy garden, and there kiss the sorrow from his set pale lips and smile the sadness from his eyes.

She could smile in his face though her heart were breaking, she thought to herself, if only she might lure him from his grief and sad amaze; if only she might win one smile in answer, and, with her head upon his breast, tell him that these wild thoughts and weird imaginings would pass from "mothie's" mind with the darkness of the night, as they had often seemed to do before.

"Go," she whispered—"go with Davie, and to-morrow come to me again. This cloud will then have passed away."

Hester's keen ear caught the words.

"He shall not go!" she cried. "No one shall leave this room till I have said my say and had my way. Hilda—wilful child!—are you going to measure your will against mine after all these years? How dare you—how dare you treat me so?"

While she spoke she had started to her feet, hurried to the door, and set her arm across it like a bar.

There was something so resolved, so desperate in her air, that both the men felt powerless to cross her will, helpless to silence her.

"It is you I have to thank," she said, turning the light of her beautiful eyes full upon Davie, "for my own child calling me a mad woman. Mad, mad, mad! that is what they all say. Who cares? If madness wins the day, as well be mad as sane, say I. Listen, then, Hilda, to what this mad mother of yours has to say. Listen! since your lover will not give you up, you must give him up; since he will not break the link between you, your hand must be the one to snap it asunder. Would you cling to the hand of the man whose father murdered yours? Think, child, how you used to love your father. Do you remember all the pretty names he had for you? His *petite reine*, his "fairy"—pshah! half-a-dozen more. And you, how you used to run and meet *mon camarade*, clip him round the neck, and laugh for gladness that he had come again."

Slowly as one who moves without her own will, as one drawn by a power against which no rebellion is possible, Hilda drew herself from her lover's side, step by step came nearer and nearer to the woman who was calling up those dear and sacred memories of the past. The girl's cheeks were deadly pale; her eyes, distended, full of fear and sorest trouble, were fixed upon her mother's face; her hands, clasped as those of one in prayer, were held out in a dumb and pitiful entreaty.

"Do you remember when Gabriel your father died, how you stole into the room where he lay, turned aside the covering from his dead white face, and stood there, wondering that he did not hear you speak—did not turn and smile upon the child he had so loved?"

Hilda's features worked, her lips trembled, while the great tears gathered in her gentle eyes—gathered and fell adown her pallid cheeks.

"*Mon camarade*," she whispered, as though speaking to herself; "*mon camarade*. Ah, how still he lies! His hair was wet, and clung about his brow; his hands, how cold. Mothie, do you think I could forget?"

For a moment a sudden shiver of tenderness shook the cold, hard, pitiless woman thus appealed to.

"Which of us could?" she moaned; "which of us could?"

Then the tigress in her sprang to life again, treading the softer nature under foot.

"Remember more still," she said; "remember how he suffered; call to mind his wild wan face looking in upon us as you sat at work in the sunshine, and then the last long kiss he gave you, Hilda, as he left us, never to return till others bore him home upon their shoulders."

Other memories were crowding upon Hilda too that Hester little thought of; memories of words that had scourged a broken suffering man as cruel thongs, of desperate passionate resentment in *mon camarade's* eyes, of bitter retort falling from faltering lips, and so a great pity grew about her heart for her mother, the secret sorrow of whose life was hers alone.

"Mothie, mothie, do not speak to me of all these things to-night; I am weak, I cannot bear it, nor can you. See how pale you are, and how your hand shakes. Oh! have pity, dear, on me and on yourself. To-morrow we will speak of all these things—not now, not now."

"I shall speak what I will, and when I will, and you shall listen. I want you now to stand in spirit by your murdered father as he lay stark and cold that day, when all the world was beautiful with sunshine and with flowers, and all my heart was one black hell of pain."

Hilda bowed her face upon her hands. She was back in the terrible past. She was deaf for the nonce even to the little inarticulate cry of tenderness and pity that broke from her lover's lips.

"I can see him," she said softly, and a shudder shook her from head to heel as she spoke—"I can see him, mothie, lying there so still and pale and cold, one golden sunray that will not be shut out pointing at his heart. The little grey kitten is nestling in my arms, and I am glad—glad, for its fur is warm against my breast, and all the rest is cold—so cold!"

"Remembering this, can you, his dearest, best-loved treasure,—the child he loved far more dearly than the mother who bore her—can you, Hilda, lift your eyes to mine and tell me that you love the son of your father's murderer?"

Hilda raised her head, raised her eyes, streaming with tears, to Hester's face.

"I love him," she said simply, yet with passion; "I love him, mothie, with all my heart."

"Tear the love from your heart. Never heed though it pain and bleed. Let me see how brave you can be; let me hear you tell the son of him who made me a widow, and my child fatherless, to quit your presence and enter it no more."

At this Ralph started to the girl's side, clasped her slender body in his arm, and gazed with straining eyes upon her face.

"You will not, Hilda—you will not do this thing?" he pleaded. "I know not what has come to me to-night. The world is changed; fear and dread are all around me. There may be a terrible future to face. Nerve me for it, oh! my darling, be it what it may. Be it never so bitter, never so full of pain and shame, the touch of your lips, the clasp of your hand, shall keep me brave, shall strengthen me to do the right, counting the cost as nothing, since my love is true to me."

Like one who moves, a shadow among shadows, part and parcel of a dream, Hilda turned, and met the dark and eager eyes that strove to read her own. Then she raised her hands to her head, pushed back the heavy nut-brown locks from her brow, and drew a long, deep shuddering sigh.

Ralph's arm was about her still, but he felt that his touch had no power to move her. She was mesmerised by a will stronger and more powerful than her own—one that had tyrannised over and swayed her through a lifetime, half by love and half by fear.

Her lips moved, but no words were audible.

A terrible light was breaking in upon her.

Facts, however distorted and magnified, underlay what she had deemed but fancies.

Davie's face began to tell her this much. Ralph, too—did he not speak of possible horrors to be faced in the future, of pain and shame, and right to be done, that wrong might be undone?

What did these things mean?

Then, like a flash, came the memory of a night of storm and rain, a night of wet leaves shining in the fitful moonlight, that gleamed through drifting clouds, and of a lonely figure out among the shadows and the shining, lift-

ing clasped hands to heaven, and of a voice, hoarse and muffled with passion, that cried out, "Liar—murderer—thief!" while a little child clung to a fluttering gown, and sobbing, said:

"Come in, mothie, out of the dark, dark night."

Was it true, that dreadful valediction, hurled at a shadowy figure flitting away among the trees, near where the dykes shone dark and bright? Was it true? And if it were, what—oh! what of Ralph? Who could shield that dear true heart from the infinite pain of knowledge?

Fears for her lover, piteous memories of *mon camarade*, new and strange imaginings as to "mothie's" life of hoarded vengeance and pain unutterable—all these thoughts made cruel turmoil in Hilda's heart.

Davie, watching the sweet tell-tale face, now so pale, and wan, and troubled, was at no loss to read Hilda's thoughts. The story of that dastardly night's work in the squire's room three years ago could find no voice with Hilda by. Ralph must learn it—must learn each detail of it; but might he not be won, through his great love for Hilda, to keep the ghastly record from her?

Would her love be strong enough to stand the test of all that now must fall upon the head of Geoffrey Stirling's son?

Ah, yes! Davie well knew the mingled strength and tenderness of her nature; who better? since, in a time now past, he had studied it as one might peruse a well-loved volume, adding knowledge to knowledge day by day.

As Hilda, swayed by the potent influence of her own growing convictions, turned a lovely, pallid face and passionate, fond eyes on Ralph, as who would say, "Sorrow is at hand, and I am here, love, to share it with you!" Hester spoke again, half laughing:

"So you begin to see that I am not quite mad, after all," she said. "Hilda, come to me."

She had crossed the room, and was sitting in her old place by the hearth. She seemed to be gathering her strength together for some supreme effort.

Hilda moved to her mother's side, knelt there, and, catching her hand to her bosom, fondled it.

"Poor mother!" she said softly in between the kisses.

How fair, how passing fair, she looked in the eyes of the

two men who watched her! The long sweep of her pale amber gown as it trailed upon the floor, the fading iris at her slender throat, the little head with its rippled crown of sunny hair, the long dark lashes, tear-wet, drooping over downcast eyes, the tender quivering lips pressed in the purest pity and devotion to the hand that was dealing her such cruel blows; the hand that was striving to stay all the new-born exquisite hopes of a heart whose love-tale had but just been told; the hand that, however cruel its clutch upon her life might be, was still—a mother's. But Hester, who had seemed hardly conscious of those sweet caresses, snatched her hand from Hilda's hold.

"What fooling is this?" she said. "Who asked you for pity? I have asked for no one's pity, not even God's, all these years. It is not pity I have longed for, it is not pity I mean to claim now. Listen to me, Hilda; give me deeds, not words; submission, not kisses. This headstrong lover of yours will not give you up, it seems. Let me hear you cast him off. You are Gabriel Devenant's child; you loved your father, or you said you did; time has not blunted the memory of the days when he and you were happy together, when he called you by fond, sweet names, and bore you in his arms when the way was too rough and hard for your tender feet. To him the child was dearer than the wife. I lost his love, and I could not win it back again, because no time was given me: but you—he loved you, Hilda, and it is for you to avenge him! Nay, do not moan like a sick child. Do not play the coward. If you suffer, if others must suffer, what have I done—what have I done with my maimed and broken life, my hot indignant heart burning like a scorching fire within my breast, all these long and weary years?"

At the sound of the lamentation that had burst from Hilda's lips, Ralph had started forward, but Hester waved him back.

"Not yet," she said, "not yet; my child must choose between us, you or me; but she has not spoken, she has not chosen yet."

Hilda, casting herself forward, flung her arms about her mother's shoulders, would have spoken, but Hester, thrusting her back, bade her keep silence.

"Look at my hands," she said mockingly; "when I was young like you they were rough with toil, no task was too menial for them; but you, Hilda, you will be a fine lady, with servants to wait upon you, a husband to anticipate your slightest wish. You will be called a lucky woman, one to be envied; but all your luck will be won at the cost of the heart's blood of suffering men and women, of the tears of the widow and the orphan, of ill-gotten gold that must bring a curse, that has brought a curse, upon the hand that clutches it. You will pillow your head on the breast of the man whose father built his own prosperity upon the ruin of others. You will live in luxury upon the proceeds of a crime, upon the riches basely stolen from the poor, whose little hoards, swept into one great heap, made Geoffrey Stirling rich. You will live upon the fruits of the crime that made me a widow, and robbed you of a father who loved you dearer than his life."

Crouching, shivering, sobbing where she knelt, hiding her face amid the folds of her mother's gown, Hilda bent beneath this hail of words, as the young, slender sapling bows before the hurricane. The low shuddering plaint that broke from her white lips sounded like the cry of a beaten child. Her heart was rent in twain. Hester's words seemed to thrash her like cruel blows, making her brain reel with the agony of them.

"How much longer am I to wait?" said the resolute voice of the mother, as the child was silent, save for faint, stifled moans of pain. "Tell this lover of yours to go; let him have his sentence from the lips that he has kissed, and that have kissed him back, not knowing that they touched a thing abominable and vile."

"No!" cried Hilda, springing to her feet, "he is not that. He is all that is brightest and most beautiful in life, to me. He is the man I love, the man who loves me; more I know not, more I cannot say. Ralph, teach me what to say. Leave me if you must."

She swayed as she spoke, and would have fallen, but that fond arms were round her, fond lips pressed heavy kisses on her white and trembling mouth, that had grown dumb with pain.

"Torture her no more," cried Ralph, turning fiercely

upon Hester, with that tender burthen still in his arms. "I will spare you the need of any further words. I will go, as you have bid her tell me to do. I will go and face life as you have made it for me. I will search out all the truth, shrinking from nothing that the truth shall tell me. I will count this, my love, not mine at all, until I know the truth. If I come to stand, poor, friendless, stripped of all my wealth before the world—because it is not mine to keep—if this be so, and then she still clings to me, in poverty, and shame, and pain, I will not give her up. I will claim her for my own in spite of you, in spite of all the sins man ever sinned, and God ever pardoned. But, even if you take my darling from me, you cannot rob me of the past. I tell you I have looked Love in the face; I know his beautiful image. I would rather have the memory of Hilda than the love of any other woman. My darling, my love," he said sobbingly, bending to the white face on his breast, "we will not forget each other, will we? Remember the old song, dear:

'It will not—it cannot—be laid aside,
It is not a thing to forget or hide. . . .'

My love, my love—in all my broken aching heart to-night I feel its sweetness still." Then, with a "slow, heavy kiss, that plucks the heart out through the lips," he let her go.

"Come, Davie," he said; "come!" and was gone ere the other had time to follow.

Hilda, voiceless, colourless, a breathing statue, followed him with strained and misty eyes till the door closed upon him; then, still staring at the cruel barrier that had shut him from her sight, she sank at Hester's feet, and her lovely head fell heavy and lifeless across her mother's lap.

Davie, whose ear had been following the dying sound of Master Ralph's footsteps along the road, broke the silence sharply.

"Do not touch her," he said, as Hester, with a scared look, bent above that helpless figure at her knee. "Leave her in peace a little while; you have not given her much in all her life, give her a little now. I have one word to say before I follow Master Ralph. You have broken your oath, the oath taken in the dead presence of the man whose murderess you are."

Hester shrank back into her chair, white and trembling.

"Not that," she said; "not that! Call me anything but that!"

"I call you what you are. And now look there," and he pointed to Hilda's senseless form. "You are trying to murder your child's heart, but I tell you you have been foiled once, you shall be foiled again. The strain is tough I know, but her love and his will stand it."

Then, seeing that Hilda stirred, Davie kept silence. He knelt beside her, raised her on his arm, bade her be of good cheer, for all would yet be well.

She smiled at him, holding out her hand for his, and so staggering to her feet let him lead her to the open window, where the balmy air might fan her colourless cheek.

"Go," she said, still smiling; "go to Ralph—he needs you more than I do."

Hester watched the two furtively. Her cruel mouth worked. Her hands were clenched the one in the other.

She watched Davie as a cat watches a mouse; but not a word passed her lips until the very echo of his footsteps had died away, and no sound broke the stillness of the night save the murmur of the river and the whisper of the breeze.

CHAPTER XXX.

NURSE PRETTYMAN.

As a calm and beauteous dawn succeeds a night of storm and tempest, so had the birth and growth of Ralph's love for Hilda Devenant broken in upon the darkness of his night of desolation. Just (so it had seemed) when the burden of life was heaviest, just when a hand was most needed to help him to bear it, a womanly palm had met his with soft yet steadfast clasp. Hilda—not the Hilda he had left, but a new Hilda, gravely sweet, a woman grown—had stepped into his life from under the shadow of the budding clematis, had come to him singing with unconsciously

prophetic lips of the love that cannot fail, or be hidden away, or set aside.

Like many of us, Ralph had imagined himself to be fording the deep water-floods of sorrow when his feet had but touched the edge of the stream. Which of us have not said to our own hearts, "Surely, this is the worst that can befall!" when, all the while, our sorrow was but as "a cloud the size of a man's hand," compared with that utter darkness which should presently fall upon us?

That his "pretty mother," that picture, not deeply graven on his life, but put in fair, faint colours, and dear in its own way, should have faded into nothing more than a memory during his absence, would alone have cast a shadow on Ralph's home-coming. She had often tried him with her fretful, childish ways; but he had been proud of her fragile beauty and that air of gentle breeding that surrounded her like an atmosphere. He would have missed her sorely.

But this possible grief had been engulfed, as a lesser thing, by an immeasurably greater, had been hidden away and masked by the swift, sharp agony of his father's death. In this lay not only the bitter sense of irreparable loss, but the gnawing pain of a cruel regret. Geoffrey Stirling had believed his son, his only son, dead; had died, slain by the shock of that supposed bereavement. True, the exaltation and the delirium of approaching dissolution had led him to speak of the dead as still living; but underlying this was the horrible fact that the man had died of a broken heart.

The mark of that sorrow lived through—in addition to the many physical hardships endured after the wreck of the *Aladdin*—was upon Ralph Stirling. Ten years seemed to have been added to his life in less than one. Strangers were apt to take him for a man of thirty. There were lines of thought and care upon his face; and on either temple, when the dark locks were raised, there shone among them a silver thread or two.

How had he not suffered, for his father's sake, in the long dreary hours passed upon that desert island in the pitiless ocean—when the sullen lapping of the waves against the rocks seemed to beat in his own maddened brain! How had he not ofttimes cast himself upon his knees upon the hard stone, stretching forth helpless and trembling hands

across the wilderness of grey, white-flecked water, while the tears had coursed down his haggard cheeks as he thought of what one loving heart would suffer listening to the story of the ill-fated *Aladdin!*

Straining eyes had seen the sail of the little brig—the sail that had seemed but as a sea-bird on the wing, beaten this way and that by the gale, and forced at last to fly the whirlpool made by the sinking ship. Straining eyes had followed it a while from that brave little boat, naught but a speck on the waste of waters, yet holding in its heart two living souls; and then, at last, it had flickered away, lost in the mist of the horizon, where sea and sky melt into each other, and grow but one. Was it not a living messenger, gone to tell the loss of the *Aladdin* with "all hands"? an arrow, darting homewards to pierce many a heart and slay many a hope?

It stabbed one heart, through and through, even unto death; nor could Ralph's cries and tears stay it in its course.

The fears that had beset him, when, cold and hungry, he stood face to face with death from exposure and privation, yet hardly felt his peril, had been more than realized. Geoffrey his father had died of grief.

What cup of bitterness more bitter could fate put to his lips?

And yet consolation came. Human sympathy—that most exquisite "balm in Gilead"—healed the poignant smart. Ralph's sorrow was not forgotten, but it was assuaged. His father's memory was not less dear; his father's lonely death—lonely for lack of him—was not a less sad recollection; but there were two to bear the burden of all things, two to share the sorrow and to feel the pity of it all—himself and the woman who loved him.

Scarcely a thought of his heart upon that saddest of all themes had he kept from Hilda. Never once had her tender sympathy failed him.

In imagination she had walked through the silent rooms of the house that called her lover master, had seen the empty chair, handled the books, with here a page turned down, and there a pencil-mark on the margin—traces left by a dead hand. In the very telling of such a tale lies the

grace of comfort, and Ralph had sought this consolation many times.

As the summer grew to fulness, so grew the measure of his sweet content. Hope blossomed with the roses. The sadness was in his heart still, but it lay in a grave overgrown with flowers. It was a sadness that could never die out of his life—(who can bury their dead so deep that no whisper shall come from lips that are dust?)—but yet a sadness that should in time become more of a fireside companion than a shunned and dreaded thing; a sadness that he and Hilda, in the days to come, should speak of together—maybe speak of to their children with hushed and reverent voices, as we speak of the precious, unforgotten dead.

So the sorrow had grown a part of the music of life, falling into unison with the rest, as the plaintive minor chord adds to the perfection and beauty of the whole harmony.

But now—with what a horrible crash and din had life been rent and torn to tatters! The hopes that had blossomed with the roses were like those queenly flowers when every perfumed petal is shed and lies trodden under foot.

Was this man, who, with despairing eyes and white and stricken face, hurried wildly along through the night, in very truth he who had passed by the same way but a few hours before, half smiling as he went, tasting the sweetness of his darling's greeting in a happy anticipation, thinking, as he walked, "So will she look," "so will she smile," "so, as they meet mine, will the gladness deepen in her eyes?"

Most unlike to this happy lover was Ralph as he now hurried on.

The beauty of the night, seen through the haggard misery of his own eyes, seemed to mock him, hedging him in, stifling him on every side with something in which he had neither part nor lot.

Death, terrible as it is, pales before dishonour. Through what travail of soul did Ralph bring himself to look upon even the barest possibility of his father's life having been a mere counterfeit—a thing outwardly beautiful, rotten within!

"It cannot be. I will not think of it as holding even a shadow of truth. I will cast it from me as I would some noisome creeping thing."

Thus, in riotous rebellion against the burden laid upon him, thoughts tossed and tumbled in his troubled mind. Then a sotter sorrow grew. If this horrible thing might be true, how must that noble nature—noble still, though mired and distorted by so cruel a fall—have suffered!

"All through the long and weary years." Those were his words then; that was the plaint wrung at last from the set and resolute lips. And he sent his only son—the son who was to him beyond expression dear—away from sight and hearing; not from any want of love—not that, not that—but because, where love is deep and tender, confidence is hard to withhold, and in some unguarded, some torturing moment, the ugly secret might have oozed out into the light of day.

Ralph was ready to curse himself for thus setting Hester's accusation before his mind as a thing substantial and real, and yet——

There was facing him the inward conviction that what she had dared to clothe in words was a living fact, not a mere lay-figure dressed up to masquerade as the instrument of a blind vengeance.

A hundred little things, not much thought of at the time, hardly noted indeed,—tricks of look and manner, quick glances of suspicion where none were called for, tender words, pleading in their tenderness—started to Ralph's memory, asserting themselves with vivid power, and all pointing the same way—all crying out as so many accusing witnesses: "He was a man with a burden on his conscience; he was a man with a past on which he feared to turn and look!"

"If it was done, then was it done for me," came as the next searing thought.

At this, a sob rose in Ralph's throat, choking him.

He was under the dark shadow of the yew-trees in the avenue; nearing the house that had seemed to him already desolate, but now took the guise of a place haunted by the restless spirit of a suffering, sin-stained man.

Of what terrible vigils had that room, of which the window even now showed palely shining under the sweeping branches of the giant yew, been the witness! What torturing thoughts had maddened a sleepless brain as the ivy

tapped against the pane and the wind moaned in the boughs overhead!

Conscious that such piteous imaginings were enervating, and that never had life called upon him so loudly to buckle on his strongest armour of manhood and face a duty stern and implacable, Ralph hastened his steps, and soon the deep clang of the hall-bell rang through the silent house, followed by poor old Gaylad's feeble bark. The man who opened the door fell back a step on seeing his master white and wan; "for all the world as if he'd met that dratted ghost as folks said was laid this long while back," as he remarked on his return to the servants'-hall.

"Is the master ill?" said Nurse Prettyman, looking up from her knitting and over her spectacles, and keeping the shining pins motionless as she spoke.

"He looks skeered-like," replied the man, "and like as if he couldn't see an inch before him."

Nurse Prettyman knitted on, but her hands trembled so that every line had to be ultimately unravelled, an unique occasion in the life of a workwoman so skilled with "the pins" as to be looked upon as a household oracle in the matter of toes, heels, and "turning."

Meanwhile Ralph Stirling had betaken himself to that room, now, henceforth, and for ever to be peopled for him by ghostly shapes of horror.

As he entered, he seemed to see, shadowy in the soft light of the candles that burned in high sconces on either side the mantel, a gaunt figure crouching over the fire, dark, restless eyes flashing from under overhanging brows, a hand nervously tossing back grey-lined locks from hollow temple and high and noble brow.

For him the empty chair by the inglenook was not without its shadowy occupant to-night.

Gaylad, too, as though subtly conscious of a haunting presence, whined as he lay prone upon the silky rug, his muzzle turned, his dim and wistful eyes raised to that empty place.

Twice, with folded arms and head dropped upon his breast, Ralph paced the room from end to end.

Upon what terrible quest was he about to enter? Whither would the dark and unknown pathway, in which he had

but as yet taken one or two faltering steps, lead him? That unfinished message, spoken by dying lips, what—what of that?

"Tell him to make—reparation!"

We can make reparation to the living. The dead are beyond such tender grace.

What, then, of Gabriel Devenant?

Many times and oft had Ralph heard the story of the bank robbery. From no one more in detail than from poor unconscious Davie.

Many of the sufferers could, even now, be recompensed.

But what of Hester, widowed? What of Hilda, bereaved of *mon camarade*, her young life overshadowed by the memory of his tragical death, her young heart saddened by the memory of his sufferings?

Every innocent word that Hilda had babbled of the father she had loved and lost now came home to the mind of the man who loved her, as a barbed arrow piercing to the marrow of his bones.

He knew not the story of Gabriel Devenant in its entirety as yet; and could but judge of it from the garbled version given to him by the wretched man's widow. According to this, Geoffrey Stirling, and he alone, was responsible for the tragedy with which it closed. Should, then, the sin of the father be so visited upon the children as to stand between heart and heart, rend life from life, and make waste and barren what once had been so full of joy and promise?

It could not be, it could not be, that fate should have in store a blow so cruel!

Ralph was almost unmanned by the bitterness of such a thought. Life without Hilda—life without love—the arms that had clasped her close and fast to know no such tender holding more—the lips that had trembled at the touch of hers, to taste such sweet ecstasy never again.

"My God," he cried, "do not take her from me! I can bear all else, but not that, not that!"

The inevitable crisis of agonising thought is prayer.

Man is powerless to aid; our pain o'ermasters us; the present must be endured, but we plead with despairing passion that the future may be given into our hand.

Ralph had cast himself down in a chair that stood opposite

his father's writing-desk. He leant his arms upon the table; his eyes were hidden in his clasped hands. Hot tears welled up behind their closed lids; a sudden sob shook him.

A woman, in such a climax of feeling, would have found relief in weeping; but to a man tears are torture, and bring no solace.

"My love, my love!" he said softly, shaken by the passion of tenderness that thrilled him through and through, as he recalled his darling's white and troubled face—the quivering mouth that had clung to his in that last mad kiss of pain and parting—the death-cold hands that, catching his, had gripped them close, and then let them go, with a piteous gesture of supreme despair and tenderness.

His brave, true love—woman and child in one—strong as the first, guileless and pure as the last—his "rose of the world," who had come to him, as he stood waiting for her in the sunshine, come to him singing of a love that could not die—singing of the divine gift she was bearing to him in her gentle hands, though she knew it not!

Stirring with the stirring of these sweet yet pitiful thoughts, Ralph's eye fell upon a letter that lay upon the desk before him. It was small and dainty; the handwriting fine and cultured.

Almost mechanically he raised it, broke the seal—of which the quaint device was a bird with wings widespread, bearing a scroll on which the motto ran, "I bring peace"—and read it, at first quickly, as with impatience, then a second time with closer attention. After that he laid it down, and a smile—a poor wan smile—curved his set lips as he sighed:

"Too late—too late, good friend!" Yet he raised the messenger of peace once more, pressed it to his lips an instant, and said with fervency: "God bless you for the truest and the best—come what may——"

The letter ran thus:

"Dear Ralph,—I cannot rest until I send you one line, just to say this—I will help you and stand by you through everything. Count upon me as your friend, and—hers.

"Yours ever affectionately,

"Margaret Boscawen."

Did not Ralph say well—was she not in very truth "the truest and the best"?

But the kindly pledge came too late. Lady Boscawen was fated to be still more puzzled, still more exercised in spirit in the future, than she had been in the past, over the affairs of Ralph Stirling, the man who was—in her eyes at least—like what her own boy might have been had God spared him to her; and Denby was predestined to be, many times, called unsympathetic, when, in reality, the honest, sturdy fellow was only embarrassed how best to show his sympathy, and conceal his dismay.

Having laid Lady Boscawen's letter aside, to be answered when time should be found for anything outside the one engrossing idea of the present, Ralph crossed to the fireplace, rang the bell, told the man-servant who answered it that he wished to speak with Mrs. Prettyman, and then—waited, conscious that the impending interview was one of vital import—shrinking from it, longing for it.

The poor soul came in timidly. She trembled, fingering the frill of her vast white muslin apron, and making believe to notice Gaylad, who rose to meet her, stirring his tail gently.

"Poor old fellow!" she said, speaking as though she had run along the passages and corridors and lost her breath in the process.

She did not look at Ralph, but said (still seeming to have all her attention fixed upon Gaylad): "Did you want to speak to me, Master Ralph?"

"Yes, nursey. Come in and shut the door—close."

As if she didn't feel bad enough already, but that her "boy" must call her by the dear old nursery-name, and "overset her" worse than ever!

She shut the door close, as he bade her, and then raised her eyes to her master's face.

What she saw there made her give a great gasp, and drove all trace of ruddy colour from her own.

Ralph came close up to her and laid his hand heavily upon her shoulder. That hand shook so much, and lay so heavy on her, that she shook with the strain and the tremble of it.

Was that her darling boy—her own dear "Master Ralph," who spoke in such a strange hoarse voice, and whose haggard

miserable eyes looked like—like his father's in those last sad days of all?

"Nursey, dear old nursey! I think my heart will break to-night."

Then she knew all.

She had been on the wrong track. She had fancied "that woman's" daughter—(thus disrespectfully and loathingly did Mrs. Prettyman designate Hester Devenant)—had been at the bottom of the mischief to-night. She had fancied herself summoned to her "boy's" presence to hear that a new mistress was coming to queen it at Dale End; nay—for was not a man in love no better than a blind, besotted fool?—perhaps that Hester Devenant was to be taken out of her own natural sphere, and set on high among her betters.

Now the faithful creature knew that a worse blight, a deeper sorrow, had fallen upon the home that was Master Ralph's that night.

"Do not look at me like that! Do not speak to me!" she cried, straining away from his hold, smiting her hands together in an agony of pity and despair; "I cannot bear thy looks, nor thy words neither—oh, my boy, my boy!—but I can find breath to curse them as cast this sorrow on thee, and I know where the curse must light."

"You have no comfort to give me? You dare not say to me that that mad woman's words are but the ravings of a disordered brain?"

Only silence answered him. Only the poor helpless hands beating each other in a dumb despair.

"Tell me what you know."

Ralph's voice, manner, aspect, all, had changed in an instant. Certainty brought strength and courage, where suspense had but weakened.

Nurse Prettyman started at the sound of that imperious behest, reflecting the very trick and manner of the dead.

Had she shut her eyes she might have fancied it was her old master, Geoffrey Stirling, speaking. She thrust out her hand as though seeking some support. She staggered as she stood.

"Sit down," said Ralph kindly, yet with the same air of imperative resolve; "try to think and to speak calmly; it will be the best help you can give me—the truest comfort."

He took her by the hands, placed her in a chair, and then stood leaning against the mantelshelf to hear what she would say.

The high narrow mirror that had once reflected Geoffrey Stirling's horrible Doppelgänger—the fell presentment of a man stricken for death—now gave back the fine profile of his son—the bloodless, marble features set in a stern resolve.

Ofttimes it is the actors, not the scenery, that change in the strange drama that is called—life.

"Ask me what you want to know," said Mrs. Prettyman, trying to put a brave face on matters, and failing ignominiously; "my heart's i' my mouth, Master Ralph, and I conna speak for t' chokin' me."

"You know—dear old nursey, do not tremble so—that my father, my dear father, had—some trouble on his mind?"

"Aye, I knew 't, none better. I was comin' along the corridor one night—later than should have been, Master Ralph, for I'd dropped off i' my chair over my knittin'—when a cold wind met me face to face, douted my candle, and slammed a door, all in a minute, so that I'd no breath left in me, and leant up agen the wall for a kind o' stay and comfort. There I stuck, starin' at the dark, as you may say; when all at once a glint o' moonshine come through the tall winder by the door, and out i' the glimmer o't I saw somethin' white creeping along secret-like, same as a boggart at cockcrow. There'd bin some talk among Jeremy and the maids of a ghost bein' seen down by the big 'den-dron-tree: so I was fearsome-like, from hearin' their daft chatterin'. Well, I stole a tip-toe to the window, and there, out among the trees, I saw a man i' a long white frock an' wi' a mighty red beard and a waggoner's hat on him. He turned his head this way and that, as he crep' along, and as he passed peeked in at the window where I stood shakin'. His face was like a dead man's face; his eyes blind-like; but for all that, something came over me all of a moment, that it was—it was—oh, Master Ralph—say the rest yersel'!"

"It was—my father——"

"Aye, aye—none else. I guessed the door that slammed was the door above the steps—that door forenenst which

the old dog lies now, as you see. I knew, all of a moment, that master was walking in his sleep. I knew it might be death to wake him. This door was locked. I ran—how quick you'd scarce believe, Master Ralph, seein' I'm such a cumbersome kind of a shape—got through the far door into the bedroom, and so behind the curtains of that window there, before the—thing—came round to the door that had slammed. It—he—fumbled a bit at the handle, got it open, came in (still going secret-like), closed it behind him, drew the bolt as cunnin' as though he'd bin as wide awake as you or me this miserable night, and slithered himself into the next room, but left the door open behind him. By this time the moon shone so bright I could see as well as if it had been day. I could hear, too, and this is what I heard him say: 'The weary, weary way—all the weary way—with that burden on my back—gold that is not mine, gold that the devil keeps, to torture me.' And then—oh dear—my boy!—the sigh he gave was like to burst his poor aching heart."

Here Nurse Prettyman paused.

She would have liked to see her "boy's" face; she would have liked to watch how he bore the dreadful tidings she had to tell.

But his face was hidden; his form was motionless; he made no sign.

"While I stared at him—as stare I might, and had good cause—he began taking off the great red beard, strippin' the waggoner's frock from off his shoulders, and laying them as orderly as anything in the big oak box that used to stand beside his bed. But I turned me round, and was nigh shoutin', for I heard a low kind of a rustle by the glass door, and you may reckon my heart stood still i' my bress when I saw a mad-like face pressed close agen the pane. It had a hood clippin' it round, and was gone like a shadow all in a minute, but I knew it for Hester Devenant's by the bad black eyes that glared like a cat's in the dark; and what a wonder and amaze I fell into the dear Lord only knows. Still I'd little time to think of ought save the master, such a terrification was on me lest he'd do himself a mischief. I slipped my shoes from my feet, stole to the door there, and watched what he'd be after next.

He must have fallen asleep in his chair, for he'd all his clothes on, even to his coat, and it was the strangest thing to see how deft he were with his hands, how he pul't the waggoner's frock off as handy as a woman, and folded it as neat as ninepence; then he laid it i' the box, and put the hat, and wig, and beard a-top on't. I heard something jingle in the bottom of the box, but could not see what 'twas —for he closed it sharp, I can tell you, and 'Safe,' says he, 'safe—thank God!' It shut with a spring, all in a minute, and then he turned him round, like as if to make sure none but himself was near, and laid him down on the bed, just dressed as he was, with a bit of a sigh like a tired child. I waited a while, douted a candle that was flarin' and spittin' in the socket, took a look at his quiet face (quiet indeed, for the eyes were fast closed, and he breathed soft and easy), and crep' away to bed, but not to sleep, Master Ralph—not to sleep."

"No, my poor old nursey, no. That was a sad night's work for you—dear!"

"His very voice, his very ways . . . Oh, my dear old master!" cried Mrs. Prettyman at this; and the fountain of her tears broke forth abundantly.

"Hush!" said Ralph, tenderly; "you must not weep like that yet. There is so much to say—so much to hear. Tell me more; tell me of—the night he died."

CHAPTER XXXI.

"I NEVER LOVED HIM TRULY—UNTIL NOW!"

"If I were to say, Master Ralph," went on Nurse Prettyman, seeming to wince at the sound of her own words; "as no thoughts of the bank robbery and the man in the waggoner's frock come over me after that night when I'd seen the ghost and knew who it was and whence it came, I should be sayin' what isna true; I should be keepin' back the thoughts o' my heart from the boy as I love same as if I bore him myself—in place of only tendin' him, and watchin' over him when he was no size to speak of, and had to cling

hold o' my petticoat wi' his dear little hand to keep upon his blessed legs."

Here the old woman stole a wistful glance at her master, hoping that these tender memories might soften the bitterness of what had gone before.

"Well, I thought, and I thought, and this and that came up before me, till it seemed as if the knittin'-pins I kep' going all the time were telling a terrible story as they clicked, and fitting it all in, piece by piece, same as if it were a pattern on my work. Half the things I thought of had been forgotten. Such bits of things, too, they were, it was strange how much they made of themselves, risin' up out of the past like so many ghosts. Many's the time I've said to myself, 'God forgive you, Eliza Prettyman, for a wicked-minded old woman this day!' But it weren't no use, the thoughts came on, one atop of another, and not one but fitted into his own place."

"I know—I know," said Ralph, and in his voice was such a ring of pain that poor Mrs. Prettyman had some ado to keep from bursting out crying afresh.

"I'm hurtin' you, Master Ralph," she said, "hurtin' you sore. Oh, I'm nothing better than an old fool! Dunnot heed my foolish words, my dearie, tak' no heed on 'em, tak' no heed on 'em. They're nowt—they're nowt!"

"Come, come," he said softly, speaking with all that outer calm that may cover a storm of restrained feeling; "you must not give way like this. You promised to help me, you know—to help me to the truth. If you fail by the way, dear old friend, how are we to get to the end of the story?"

"Ay, ay, the end of the story, that's the worst of it. Each word brings us nearer that. Ah, my dear, that's the hardest of all to tell!"

She lifted and wrung her hands, while Ralph watched her in a fresh amaze.

How was this terrible night to end—this night that had begun with all things fair and beautiful, all things sweet and tender; with the touch of Hilda's trembling lips, and the clasp of her satin-soft hand, and had passed into a horror of unutterable pain, into the semblance of a dream, mystifying and terrible? Were there deeper depths of

agony to sound, suffering to be met that should seem "beyond, beyond," when set side by side with that which had gone before?

Scared by her young master's set pale face, Nurse Prettyman, with a shrewdness characteristic of the north-country peasant-class from which she sprang, realized that certain knowledge, however black, would be more endurable to him than suspense.

She rose to her feet, came close up to him, and laid her hand upon his arm, closely grasping it.

"The end of the story's this, Master Ralph," she said, her eyes glittering, her cheek flushing hotly with the passion of her speech; "Squire Geoffrey was driven to his death—hunted down—murdered—by Hester Devenant . . . She came here to help nurse him, as she said, but that was only the false and lying face she put upon it. What she came here for was to spy upon him—to worm the truth out of him—to torture him with that cruel tongue of hers that sticks at nowt—and him struck down and laid so low already by the hand o' sorrow—the shameless hussy!"

There—it was told; that ghastly "end of the story," of which she had so dreaded the telling; and Master Ralph had taken it "better than she thought for."

Why, he spoke quieter than before!

"She wanted to force my father—to—confess?

"Aye, that did she, and what's more, she had her way."

"How?"

"Ah, Master Ralph, there's none save One above knows that."

"Nursey, sit down again. You can speak quieter so, and the better you can speak the better I can listen. Take up the story from the time when Davie, falling at his feet, told my father that he should see my face no more till the sea gave up its dead. I want to hear it word by word. I want to take it in—to write it on my heart for ever."

"He was stricken, Master Ralph, was the squire—stricken down—by the words that Davie spoke."

"Through his heart—through his tender loving heart."

"Aye, through the heart as was still sorrowful for the loss of his 'pretty Lucy,' as he ca'ed her. He was never the same no more."

"Never the same no more—so well he loved me!"

"So well he loved you, Master Ralph; and he was full of strange fancies; he thought he was watched, hunted, suspected."

"God had taken from him the creature of whom he had made an idol, the creature for whom he had—sinned; and the sin began to weigh upon him, as it had never weighed before—poor heart—poor heart!"

"You may well say that, Master Ralph. It was a cruel sight to see the change that but a day brought about in him. He drove Davie from his presence—me too, me too—crying out mad like, 'Are *you* spying on me too?' Then came that dreadful night when the vicar and Davie broke in through the door to find him lying all a-heap like as if he were dead. I've told you over and over a'ready, Master Ralph, how we got him into the next room, and how Davie had Dr. Turtle by his side before you'd have thought he'd had time to run to the town, let alone back again. It was little the poor squire spoke them sad days. He'd moan and mumble things we couldn't make head nor tail of, and draw long sighs such as from a heart that was broke must have come. But he mended; the doctor got to step lightsomer as he came out of the room, and took his pinch with a jauntier look on him; that did he! Still master needed a deal of watchin', and Davie and me got pretty nigh wearied out, for all the vicar took many a turn—and him wi' a sick wife at home too. Then Davie had to go south to see if any news could be gathered up about that misfortunate ship o' yours, and soon after things came heavier and heavier on me. I was smote down wi' a quinsy. Of all the Lord's dealin's with me, Master Ralph, that quinsy's the hardest one to swallow; it was a dispensation hard to see the wisdom of; still, if you can neither speak nor breathe, where are you?"

Mrs. Prettyman smoothed down her apron with trembling hands, as she put this question to the universe.

"Well, Master Ralph, when they come and told me how Mistress Devenant had made offers to help nurse the squire I fair scrouged on my pillow, for I reckoned she'd some ill-will agen him—though far from measuring it right—and I hated the woman, though it's hard to say why. Hate grows up in a heart sometimes like a weed in a garden. No

one knows who planted it, nor where the seed came from as mothered it, but there it is. Hester Devenant had followed the master time as he walked in his sleep. What of that? Anyone might have done the same. Perchance that little prattling fool, Jake, and then all the town would have known who the ghost was. But I'd never heard a word of gossip (trust the maids for bringing it home as if it was to be catched), so I'd no much call to put myself in a tantrum over the woman coming, and yet I got the cold creeps down my back when Dr. Turtle told me of it. He told me joyful too, trippin' across the room on his toes, like a bird ready to fly. I couldn't say much, wi' a lump the size of a kidney-potato i' my throat, so I let him say his say, and have his way; but I prayed the Lord to let the quinsy burst sharp—and it did, Master Ralph, it did—the night the squire died."

"The night she forced him to confess?"

"Aye; and in a moment I was a woman who could breathe and speak and do 'my duty in that state of life.' I wrapped me in an old shawl, and set off as easy as anything down the corridors to tak' a peek at the new nurse and see how she was wearing through the night. That door—the one that leads into the passage from the room below—was a bit of a way open, and through it come a streak of light. You might have thought the place was afire by the flare of it. New-fangled ways to deal wi' a sick man in the night-time, thinks I to myself. French ways, thinks I to myself, contemptuous like, and wondering what her fine ladyship would say when I told her how the quinsy had bursted, and set me on my legs again. Well, Master Ralph, I stopped short outside that open door, for from within came the sound of voices—hers and Davie's. Now Davie had come off a journey and gone to his bed tired out and ready to fall asleep over his supper, so I wondered to find him in the squire's room at the deadest hour of the night."

"What did you hear?" said Ralph sharply.

"I heard Davie call the other a murderess, and then Mrs. Devenant screeched out under her breath, and 'Not that,' says she, 'not that, call me anything but that! There is no blood upon my hands.'"

"The dream, the dream that Hilda told me of . . ." muttered Ralph.

At which Mrs. Prettyman wondered, and—hearing her young master say "Hilda," plump and plain—knew that love was *his* master, and Hester Devenant's daughter the woman he loved.

"Mistress Devenant was squeezed up agen the wall, like as if she'd ha' been glad to go through it and out at t'other side," said Mrs. Prettyman, taking up her narrative where she had dropped it—with an idea that people in love were given to ejaculatory utterances, and not be questioned thereupon—"like as if Davie had been drivin' her away, as far as he could, from the place where my master lay dead, with his white face looking upward, his eyes starin', and his poor dead hands stretched out straight, just, as I learned after, as they'd fallen from Davie's neck. When I saw that sight, a mighty cry came out of me, and I fled to the bed, and cast myself down aside of it. Then Davie turned and saw me, and 'Mrs. Prettyman,' says he, sobbing so he scarce could get the words out, 'she's killed him, killed him, killed him!' Each time he said 'killed,' Mrs. Devenant shrank away against the wall, closer and closer, but as he went on reviling her, and calling her a Judas and a traitor—and many a thing I can't remember, her spirit seemed to rise up in her, and she came right across to him. 'See,' she says, pointing to the great oak box that stood there open, like a gaping coffin; 'it was your master walked at night among the trees—it was your master robbed the bank, and drove my husband to his death; and you—you do well to fight for him—he drugged you the night he robbed the bank—that was why you slept so sound; and he said he would have killed you if there had been need!' She set her teeth at this, and drew her breath in through them, so that it sounded like the hissing of a snake. But Davie, he never stirred: he blenched a bit, but looked at her steady, and I, holding the dead hand in mine, watched her too. 'He has confessed,' she said, 'he has confessed.' 'And died repentant,' says Davie, 'repentant, and praying for God's pardon through the precious blood. You are foiled all ways,' says he with a strange bit of a joyful-like laugh—'foiled of your vengeance here, and of the soul that rests with God! He did not drive your husband to his death,' says he (and you'd scarce have known Davie, Master Ralph, so stern was he, and his eyes shinin' like

stars); '*you* drove Gabriel Devenant to despair with your hard words and your hard ways, and despair made death come easy when an extra load of trouble fell on him. I tell you the man was glad to die.' Eh, but she shivered at that —and Davie so got the better of her with one thing or another that, last of all, he made her swear, in the presence of the dead, that no word of the ending the squire had made should ever pass her lips. He dragged her to the bed, and made her touch the poor dead hand that lay so helpless, and swear to all he bade her, holding it. She was more mad than sane, by then, yet had an evil look through all, and I heard her mutter to herself, and caught the look she threw at Davie when his back was towards her. By this, the candles were beginning to burn blue, and the mornin' was peepin' in through the curtains. 'Let me go,' says Mrs. Devenant, and I saw she daren't let her eyes light on what lay so stark and stiff upon the bed. 'Silence for silence,' says Davie, catching her by the wrists, and holdin' her tight; 'that's our bargain. Keep silence on your side, and I'll tell no one that you drove the squire to his death. I know what you did,' says he, as fierce as fierce, and starin' at her so that she shrunk away from him like as if he could blight her where she stood; 'you gave him his sleeping draught, lit up the place like this, and then roused him into frenzy with your gibes and accusations. You went a sure way to work,' says he; 'it's a pity you didn't put the candles out before I came, and manage to look a bit less guilty, a bit less like the murderess you are,' says he, and you'd have thought he'd give her a blow, she cringed so at the word whose sound she couldn't abide. 'Davie, Davie,' says she, 'how can you be so hard with me? Why, it isn't many hours back since you kissed me,' and she gave a kind of a whine like a beaten dog, and came close beside him. 'I loved you then,' said Davie, 'for you were Hilda's mother.' 'I am that still,' says the other, proud-like, all in a moment. 'No,' says he, 'not to me; never that to me any more, only my master's——' But she give a screech, and he hadn't time to get the word out. When she left the room she never once let her eyes turn to the bed, and then—when we were well shut of her—Davie he told me—told me——"

"What my father had said—the message he had sent to

me—his son?" put in Ralph firmly, coming promptly to the aid of the poor stammering tongue.

"Aye, Master Ralph, he told me all that; he spoke wi' tears and sobbings, same as a woman might, and we closed the poor staring eyes and tied up the fallen mouth, while our tears fell on the still white face—for we loved him, Master Ralph, we loved him; let him ha' done what he might——"

Ralph turned quickly from her. He dare not dwell upon the picture of this touching and absolute devotion. In stern self-control lay his only chance of endurance, his only chance of being able to face—as a man should face—the terrible duty that lay before him.

"What has come of Davie?" he said impatiently. "I told him to follow me——"

"You have seen him then, sir?" said Mrs. Prettyman in some surprise; "I thought he had gone to the Vicarage. He came in with your name upon his lips, and when all the mort o' things he's brought from foreign parts were up the tower stairs, he said he was going out. 'Won't you wait for the young master?' says I. 'No, I won't,' says he, and was gone, and Gaylad whinin' after him."

"He came after me to—Mrs. Devenant's," said Ralph, a sudden shudder shaking him.

Mrs. Prettyman gasped, but found no word ready.

"You have been faithful to me and mine," continued her master; "you have kept our counsel and tried to shield our honour; you are friend and servant in one, and a friend should be treated with confidence——"

She knew what was coming, and waited, trembling.

"I love Hilda Devenant, and she loves me. Either she will be my wife one day, or there will be no wife of mine ever at all, and I shall have to live with nothing but her dear memory for company as best I may—through a changed and altered life."

"A changed and altered life!" cried Mrs. Prettyman. "Ah, Master Ralph, my darling boy—what thoughts are in your mind? What strange fancies are upon you? What strange look is that in your poor pale face? And yet—you can smile!"

"Yes, I can smile, for—hearken, dear good friend of mine

—I would rather my father had died—as he did, with all the outward horror of it—died penitent, and yearning to make reparation—died craving God's pardon and man's pity, than that he had lived down the sin and the sorrow to the end. Nay, do not look at me like that, dear! Your boy has not gone mad; never, believe me, was he so truly in his sober senses; and, nursey—listen—I thought I loved my father all my life, loved him as the best and dearest thing I had, but I think I never loved him truly—until now!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN CONCLAVE.

With the utterance of that pathetic cry of compassionate love, a sob broke from Ralph Stirling. But no tear dimmed his eyes.

It would not do to yield to the flood of infinite pity and yearning tenderness that filled his heart, as he began to grasp and realise the idea of what had been his father's life, his sorrow, and—his sin.

Nurse Prettyman watched her foster-child with sore misgivings. She saw him under a new and unfamiliar aspect. Her shrewd mind quickly gathered the meaning of those pregnant words, "a changed and altered life."

A life stripped of wealth and all the luxury and state that accrue from wealth; a life of struggle and self-denial, of effort to expiate a sin not his own.

In her own simple way she thought these things, and a sudden sense of helplessness, of fear of the man, who, as he stood before her now, appeared like one whom she had never known, not as her darling "Master Ralph," came over her. She hailed with joy the sound of steps and voices in the hall and the touch of a firm hand upon the latch.

She could not have wished for anything better than that the vicar should appear at such a crisis as the present. The fact that Davie followed him assured her that he came armed with the fullest knowledge, and it was with little or no

surprise she saw the scared white face and fluttering locks of Anthony Geddes behind the other two.

The old man came in timidly, rubbing his shaking hands the one in the other, and looking at Master Ralph with large, dim, wondering eyes, that seemed to be gazing appalledly at the ruins of the House and the dead ashes of the Firm as by him represented.

Had not the rout and ruin of thirteen years ago been abject enough but that now disaster tenfold as terrible must come upon the name that Anthony Geddes loved?

Could the marvellous story be true that he had listened to from the vicar with almost a feeling as though reverend lips were speaking blasphemy against the dead? And yet, beneath this natural revolt against the rending to tatters of a life's belief and trust, had there not been scattered memories, gathering themselves together, a serried rank of witnesses, all pointing the same way, all telling the same tale?

What immeasurable pity, what tender yearning, filled the heart of Anthony Geddes as he looked on Master Ralph—that bright boy, who in times past had seemed to his eyes as sunshine, smiling and nodding at the old manager, as he went upon his way with his little hand tucked safely into that of the proud and happy father!

"Sit down, old friend," said Ralph gently, seeing that Anthony shook like an autumn-leaf shivering in the wind, and scarce could stand. With a low sound, half moan, half mutter, the old man obeyed. It seemed as if his old master's voice were speaking to him—so like—so like were look and tone, and exquisite grave courtesy. . . .

As Ralph faced the vicar, the two men grasped hands, and stood a moment silent, eye to eye.

"I thank God for the good courage that is in you!" said Cuthbert Deane with solemn joy.

"Thank God, indeed!" echoed Davie; "but Master Ralph hardly knows the worst yet."

"I think I do, Davie—I think I have drained the bitter chalice to the dregs."

"Ay, that has he," put in Nurse Prettyman; "I've kep' nothing back, sir," she went on, addressing herself directly to Cuthbert Deane, as feeling that, if her spiritual pastors and masters were satisfied, then need no man carp.

"You did well, and have spared Davie a painful task, Mrs. Prettyman," said the vicar, while something in his manner subtly suggested to the good woman that her part in the stirring drama in process of enactment was, for the time being, at an end.

Noiselessly she withdrew, and closed the door upon that strange quartette gathered together in the room where Geoffrey Stirling had kept such agonised and weary vigil.

"She is to be trusted?" said the vicar, looking at Ralph.

The answer came in one word:

"Absolutely."

That question and answer were the first outward signs of the meaning and design—hitherto unacknowledged in words, yet plainly enough stamped upon the heart and mind of each—that actuated the four men now met in conclave. This conclave was, in fact, a conspiracy deep and perilous, not to defeat, but to compass, the ends of justice; not only so, but—difficult and delicate task!—in the doing of this, to shield the honour of a dead man, and to guard inviolate the sanctity of a well-loved name.

Of the four, he who was most nearly and dearly concerned, showed the greatest outward calmness. In truth, Cuthbert Deane watched Ralph with amaze, dreading the reaction that must follow such dire and sustained effort. Yet was he too wise to weaken by a word of pity or a touch of tenderness.

"Davie," said Ralph (and at the sound of his own name Davie started as though his own guilt, and not that of another, were under investigation), "tell me, where have you hidden away the oaken coffer and its contents?"

The question was not put with an air of uncertainty, but as one founded on a known fact.

"I—I—had taken it to the tower-room," stammered Davie.

"With the help of Mrs. Prettyman?" continued his master.

"Yes; we thought that the wisest course."

"What it contained has been—destroyed?"

Davie took out his handkerchief and wiped his brow that was dank with sweat.

"Master Ralph," he said, "have I angered you in this matter? God knows I have prayed upon my bended knees

to be shown the right way. I have carried a heavy burden on my heart this three years back. I have grown old over bearing it. All I thought of was to shield you. Master Ralph—do not look at me like that!"

"If Davie erred, it was from too much love," said the vicar, and his hand fell upon the ill-balanced, heavy shoulder, and rested there.

At which touch and word Davie broke out crying like a child.

"God forgive me!" said Ralph with a quick despairing gesture; "sorrow and suffering are making me hard and cruel even to those who love me best!"

"Nay, nay, Master Ralph," quavered old Anthony at this; "it's not hard you are—only stunned-like, same as one who has got a blow nigh unto death, and must have time to gather himsel' together. Happen it might ha' been better for Davie to have written and told you all the truth when you were given back to us—like him that was raised from the dead by the Lord's own hand, and given back to the kindred that mourned him—but it would ha' been a sorry kind o' greetin', and Davie, in his lovin' heart, thought to hide away the thing for ever. I'm an old man, Master Ralph—an old man that has grown grey in your father's service and your own, and thus I make bold to speak, and say I can put myself in Davie's place, and see with Davie's eyes, and feel with Davie's heart. Ay—ay! but 'twas hard on the lad, a sorry burden to be lifted and carried wi' him to a far-off land."

"Where he has toiled—for me," said Ralph; "Davie, can you forgive me for a moment's unjust anger? Remember I have been sorely tried to-night; am hardly, as Anthony has truly said, able to look at anything fairly—am still half-stunned—reeling from a horrible shock—I crave forbearance at your hands."

"The waggoner's frock, the beard, and hat were all destroyed. I kept nothing but the keys that lay under all. Even those I did not mean to keep; but the heavy lid of the coffer fell and closed. I could not open it again—it has no lock, no latch."

Thus ran Davie's story, and, as Ralph listened, a new eagerness, a new light, lit up his face.

"I am glad the coffer has kept its secret so well," he said with a faint smile; "we will make it speak yet. Now, Anthony, your memory, I know, is as clear as when you first became manager of Stirling's bank—try if you can recall what kind of keys fitted the two outer doors?"

"I can remember them as well as though I saw them before me now," replied the old man, trembling with eagerness, and holding out his hand as though he grasped the keys and heard them clink together as he had done many a time in those bygone days, when "the boy Davie" brought them to him after the bank was closed. "They had hook-wards, and were deep and broad. I could draw them, if my hand were a bit steadier."

"You hear?" said Ralph, turning to the vicar with a grave impressive look.

Then he turned again to Davie.

"The coffer is carved in a quaint device of roses; below, on either side, close to the feet, a griffin. Press and turn the eye of the griffin on the right: then—bring me the keys. When I was a little fellow—a curious one, too, and one who liked to see the ins and outs of all things—my dearest father showed me the trick of that old coffer. The knowledge will stand me in a good stead now."

After Davie had left the room silence reigned, broken only by the soft beat of old Anthony's hand upon the table.

Cuthbert Deane stood by the mantel, his eyes shaded by his hand. Ralph, his arms folded on his breast, seemed listening to Davie's footsteps as they died away in the distance; listening then for their return.

At first faint, then growing louder and more distinct, at last they were heard.

The door, that had been left unlatched, was pushed open, closely shut, and then——

Davie laid two large keys upon the table before which sat Anthony Geddes.

There lay the silent yet eloquent witnesses to Geoffrey Stirling's sin.

Two keys with hook-wards, deep and wide.

Anthony raised them; weighing them in his hand.

"They are duplicates," he said; "they are lighter than the keys I used to handle, but of the same shape and fashion."

Cuthbert Deane drew a long breath. He too, like the others, had spun his web of thought in which each mesh fitted into the whole without a flaw; and yet, he had been as one who dreams, and dreaming says to his own soul, "I do but dream, this is but the phantasy of my brain," so unreal had all things seemed to him. At the moment when Davie, pale and troubled, came into his study, and there, with excited gesture and wild words, had told of the sore strait into which Ralph Stirling had drifted—nothing had seemed real to Cuthbert Deane save the necessity of concealing from Alicia that their untimely visitor was David Robin, and of blinding her to the sore trouble which he could not stop to explain.

So with a smile and a kiss, and a suggestion that she had better go to bed, as he might be kept out late, he left her; seeming to step out of the sacred peacefulness of his quiet home, into a darkness fraught with wonder and distress unparalleled.

Now, as he listened to the old clerk's quavering voice—as he saw the shaking hand hold the duplicate keys that were the strange link between the dead and the living—a clearer light came upon him.

This thing—this marvellous, incredible thing—that Davie had told him in hurried, half-whispered, often incoherent words was—true.

All unknowing he had walked in close companionship with a heart, weary and heavy-laden under its load of hidden sin; had watched a life—not without some instinctive feeling of a mystery underlying and shaping it—yet failing to gather the faintest suspicions of what that mystery was. In the case of Hester Devenant too, how little had he guessed at the nature of the ruling passion that had so disturbed and blighted her miserable, suffering soul—how had he been made the tool of her craft and cunning! Hot indignation with her cruel scheme of vengeance mingled with infinite pity for her life-long pain in his troubled mind.

To be of what help he could to Ralph and Hilda—to frustrate, if possible, Hester's plot to tear asunder hearts that truly loved, these would be aims worth striving after, now that he held the clue to so much that had been a

puzzle to him, and could guide himself by it. Both the vicar and old Anthony were conscious of a strange reluctance to comment upon Hester Devenant's share in the terrible story of reluctant confession and passionate repentance now laid bare. Both were indignant at the crafty vengeance she had planned, and at the relentless and cruel spirit in which that plan had been carried to its bitter ending. Yet the knowledge of Ralph's love for her daughter Hilda resulted in a certain reserve in words of condemnation; and, hitherto, the whole matter had been discussed in various bearings with marvellously small reference to Hester in any way.

Davie, however—at once hot, loving, and faulty in nature, knew no such delicate reticence; and as the vicar, slowly pacing the long room from end to end, let troubled thoughts have their way, suddenly broke out into vehement denunciation of the wrong done by a vindictive woman to a dying man.

For a while, Ralph, pale and bewildered, listened to the torrent of Davie's words: failing not the while to read some sympathy with the speaker in the face of the other two listeners.

Davie, passionately appealing to Ralph, asked what punishment was to be hurled at this wicked woman who had hunted Squire Geoffrey to his death: who had encompassed his feet with snares: who had made friendship, and even love itself, the tools of her evil will?

"Master Ralph," he said, "Master Ralph—what is to be done to her?"

"Nothing."

Davie, wringing his hands, gave a low cry of rage and pain.

"Is there no hatred in your heart against her who has worked such wickedness, and driven him we loved to his death?"

"None."

The vicar—his calm steadfast eyes fixed on Ralph's face—drew nearer and nearer to his side.

Old Anthony grasped the edge of the table with his trembling hands.

Like the sudden calm that follows a hurricane, silence—

broken only by the sobbing sound of Davie's hurried breathing—fell upon the group.

At last Ralph spoke.

"There is no hatred in my heart," he said, "only pity—deep, unutterable pity—no hot anger urges me on to revenge my father's wrongs, though the thought of every pang he suffered pierces my heart to the core."

"Mine too—mine too—" cried Davie, who had shrunk back at the sound of that one word "none," as though thrust aside by a blow; but Ralph raised his hand with an imperious gesture that was familiar indeed to those who had known Geoffrey Stirling,—then spoke again. "But for Hester Devenant's fell work, that sacred behest, to make reparation, might never have reached me; but for her, the dying lips might never have made confession—never cried for mercy. Thinking of these things, even while my heart breaks in pity over what *he* suffered, I can forgive *her*."

Davie's head dropped upon his breast as he listened.

What logic had he—simple, loving, faithful soul—to oppose to such high reasoning?

The vicar's hand had somehow closed in Ralph's, and in its firm strong grasp a tortured man found courage for what was yet to come—for words that must be uttered—cost what they might. "You have laid bare your heart to me," said Ralph to Davie; "laid bare its love and fealty to me and mine, and I would lay mine bare to you—and to these others—my best friends. I stand before you stripped of all earthly possessions, save and except the small dower that was my mother's. For the rest—home and lands, moneys—I hold them all . . . in trust for my dear father, Geoffrey Stirling, to be made use of as you and I shall see fit—for the carrying out of that last prayer of his—to make reparation."

Davie's eyes seemed ready to start from his head as he stared at the pallid face and stiffly moving lips of his unhappy master. Tears streamed down the furrowed cheeks of Anthony Geddes. The vicar's head was bowed in voiceless prayer.

Truly "the evil that men do lives after them."

It was a bitter legacy that Geoffrey Stirling had left to those who loved him.

* * * * *

After long debate carried on far into the night, Ralph Stirling found himself alone in his now doubly desolate home.

Words of cheer, words of hope and sympathy, had not been lacking. Yet was his heart sore within him.

Throwing himself upon his bed, he fell at first into the stupor-like rest of abject bodily and mental exhaustion; but towards morning, as lighter and more healthful slumber supervened, the angel of pity touched him, and he smiled as he slept.

For he dreamed of the touch of Hilda's lips on his, and her voice seemed to murmur words of love and comfort in his ear; so that, for a while, in sleep he forgot sorrow.

But when morning dawned, and he gazed wistfully on the beautiful home that had never been dearer in his eyes than now when it was no longer his own, he remembered with a bitter pang that never would that dainty love of his wander among the roses, or linger in the purple shadow of the old cedar tree.

An hour later he was tearing wildly down the pathway that led to the White House, all thought of his own sorrow and trouble forgotten in the overwhelming idea that terrible disaster had fallen upon the woman he loved.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"AFTER LIFE'S FITFUL FEVER . . . "

On that night of wild dispeace and mad contention, when Davie's footsteps had died into silence, and mother and daughter were left face to face, Hilda—trembling in every limb—still dazed from the effects of that sudden swoon which had seemed to her as though the chill hand of death had grasped her tired heart—went timidly to her mother's side.

"Mother," she said, "have you nothing to say to me—not one word of comfort for me, dear? Ah me! my heart is fit to break in twain to see my dear love suffer so, and for no sin of his—no sin of his!"

"All your thought is for the living lover; for the dead father you have none. You are a traitor to the blood that beats in your false and cowardly heart!"

"Mother, mother, did you never know what it is—to love? How it seems to fill one with longing to make the beloved one happy? How it teaches a poor weak woman, such as I, to try and be strong and full of a good courage, and to stand by the man I love, against the world?"

"While you sing to this tune, Hilda, I do not care to listen. I have had my say. Choose between him and me. I tell you I long to see him suffer. I long to see him stripped of all his wealth, of all good men's honour, of all that makes life dearest to him—parted from the woman he loves. I long to see him hunted from the home that is his by wrong and not by right; then I could die happy. Is he not his father's son? Did not death rob me of my vengeance once, just when it seemed within my grasp? There is no fear of that now. The father was old and feeble. I was a fool to fancy he could live through such an ordeal—a fool, a blind, besotted fool;—but the son is young and strong; death dare not lay its hand on such as he. . . . I have counted the chances till I know them off by heart! I have not blundered this time."

Hilda, watching the cruel lips that worked as they muttered, grew fearful of that awful figure of incarnate hate, whose name, for her, was "mother."

She shrank back against the wall; her hands were pressed upon her breast as if to still its panting; her eyes were wide and full of fear; her lips were drawn back from the white teeth set in a tension of pain.

"I watched him," continued Hester, seeming to speak rather to herself than to Hilda, "day by day, hour by hour; each day, each hour was sweeter to him than the last—sweeter to him and—to her. He was caught in the meshes of the net that fate and I had spread for him, and now—now that the harvest of my longing is at hand, shall I let myself be foiled by a girl's whim, by a child's fancy for its latest toy? Not I—not I! . . . Hilda, are you there?"

Something that might have been Hilda's wraith—so white, so wan, so full of shuddering horror did it seem—answered to that call; came trembling to her knee, and sank there,

gazing up at her with frightened eyes. But fear died out of them, and wonder grew.

Could it be Hester Devenant's voice that spoke? Could it be Hester Devenant's hand that touched so tenderly the ruffled nut-brown hair? Could it be Hester Devenant's lips that were laid upon that lovely brow, damp with the dew of pain.

"You have thought me stern and hard. I have heard you sobbing my name in your sleep—praying to be loved 'only a little,' that your life might be less lonely, your heart less starved. Well—let us begin a new life together, child. I will promise you such love and tenderness as only strong hard natures like mine when they melt and soften can give. Your heart shall never more be starved—rather over-fed. We will be for ever each by the other, moved by the same thoughts, stirred by the same fancies. We will gather flowers from our garden, and take them, together, to your father's grave. There—as I tell you the story of his love and mine, dew that had its fountain in your eyes shall fall and glisten on their leaves. When you were a baby-girl I was often hard with you, I know; but remember, child, I had been reared like that—had known no other training. It was not want of love! Often, as you slept, I have stood and watched you till the tears have blinded me—for my life was sad. . . . The light that once had shone for me shone no more: but now—now, we will try to make each other happy, will we not—my sweet, my sweet!"

What good angel had touched that hardened heart? What strange new birth had that dark spirit, in a moment's time, in the twinkling of an eye, passed through, becoming a new creature?

Hilda, in wild amaze and rapture, clung about her mother, and, when the glad tears came, hid them upon her bosom.

Thus sheltered in what she deemed a newly-found and precious haven, she could not see the evil, eager light that shone out in her mother's eyes, nor yet the hard triumphant smile that curved her lips.

Closer and closer grew the unaccustomed clasp of those enfolding arms; heavier and heavier pressed the hand that lay on Hilda's bowed head.

"These happy things shall come to pass, shall they not?"

whispered Hester pleadingly; "you will not thwart me now, my darling? You will give up this lover of yours—this felon's son? You will teach your heart and lips to curse him—as mine do?"

"No—no!" cried Hilda, starting from the loving attitude of humility, and standing before her mother a beautiful figure of defiance; "He is good, noble, true! I shall pray for Heaven's best blessings on his head, as long as I have breath. Oh, mother—think how he suffered here to-night—think of the look on his dear face as he turned to Davie for comfort, and Davie had none to give! My God! shall I ever forget it? And I—I could do nothing! I could do nothing but stand by—helpless and undone!"

A change came over Hester as she listened.

The light, the life, the eagerness died out of her face. It became set, stern, mask-like. She gathered her shawl about her shoulders, rose, and moved towards the door.

"Mother, mother!" cried Hilda, following, and catching at her sleeve; "are you going to leave me like this? Why has your heart hardened to me again?"

The poignant agony in her voice might well have pleaded for her with the cruellest; but Hester heard it unmoved.

She had played her last card. She was once more foiled in her scheme of vengeance; for she did not know, in her crafty soul, that to Ralph Stirling houses and lands, wealth and fame—all might be counted as "well lost," if but Hilda were his own?

Whatever blows fate had in store for him he could face them bravely, with Hilda's hand in his—Hilda's kisses on his lips. He was panoplied in that invincible armour the love of a fond and faithful woman. He was safe from any wound that was not dealt through her.

Only through that strong and tender safeguard could his heart be stabbed; and now—the hand that might have wielded the barb clung to him instead, and would not loose its passionate, fond hold.

"Mother; one word," pleaded Hilda—"I do not love you less, because I love him much. Forgive him—forgive him the only sin of which he is guilty, that of being his father's son, and we will try which can love you best—he or

I! He said to-night that he would never take me from you. Mothie—mothie!"

She fell upon her knees, clutching her mother's dress, and hiding her quivering face among its folds.

Would pity conquer, after all? Would the love for her child, which Hester had said lay deep and hidden in her heart, rise and swamp that lust for vengeance that, yielded to, had made her what she was—a miserable woman, self-tortured, torturing, half-mad, desolate indeed?

In the heavy silence which followed her last words, Hilda waited, panting out her breath in short quick sobs; praying in a wordless ecstasy of suffering; but she waited in vain.

At last, feeling the form to which she clung tremble, hoping against hope that a flood of tender yielding was making words impossible, she looked up.

Then she cried, and her voice seemed to her own ears as that of a stranger, so hoarse, so changed, so charged with fear did it ring out.

"Mother, what is it? Tell me; speak to me! What is it that you see?"

What indeed?

Some vision that called up a smile of ineffable tenderness—some vision towards which her hands were stretched as in a passion of love and longing.

Her eyes, fixed and clouded, were staring out into the night of dusky stirring shadows, and pale fitful lights. A livid spot of hot colour burned upon either hollow cheek. Her trembling lips were purple. The veins upon her brow stood out like cords. Her whole form and figure expressed that exultation of the brain that is allied to phrensy.

"See," she said, speaking hurriedly and labouring sorely for breath; "he is there, waiting for me, beckoning to me! Yes, I am coming, Gabriel; I am coming. . . Give me my cloak, and my gipsy-bonnet; he likes me best in that. I can go through the firwood . . . they will not see me; brother is at the milking sheds; the brindle cow is sick. . . Father is talking with old neighbour Dan, out in the porch; there is no fear, I tell you . . . give me my cloak."

Hilda, wild with fear, could but fling both arms about her mother as she knelt, and watched her in a stupor of amaze.

It was a trance—a seizure, the result of a long and dreadful strain—it would pass.

"Mother, mother! it is I—Hilda! Do you not know me, dear? Look at me—speak to me. Oh, my God!—what shall I do?"

Still deaf, still blind to all external things, Hester did but strain a step nearer to the open window that framed the picture of the night.

"I am coming," she whispered: "my love I am coming to you now. . . . How sweet the hay smells! I hear the sheep-bells tinkling in the field by the river. Let us go there, Gabriel. Why do you not take my hand? Who is this that stands between us? He waves me back from you; what does he say . . . what does he say?"

A moment she stood silent, gasping for breath—then clasped her hands above her heart, and tore at her dress as though some burning agony consumed her.

Her voice rose high.

"Not that Davie; Davie, do not call me that—anything but that! There is no blood upon my hands; let me go—let me go!"

With a wild despairing gesture she flung up her arms; a harsh and strangled cry broke from her throat; then came the hollow rattling sound of a deep-drawn breath—and she fell heavily all her length, as one might do who is shot through the heart.

Once more death had wrested the cup of vengeance from Hester Devenant's hand ere her lips had drained it.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"SHE SLEEPS WELL."

"It is I—Alicia."

The room was darkened. Death was holding his solemn court. In the midst of the gloom that ever seems his most fitting surrounding lay the marble-white effigy of a woman. Sometimes the touch of Azrael hardens. Here it had

softened. Hester Devenant's cruel mouth was peaceful now in its still and noble lines. A faint smile lay upon it. The closed eyes—the hands crossed upon the quiet breast—all spoke of rest, and were the more solemn and striking since in life both eyes and hands had been such restless things.

Years ago Hilda had been possessed by the idea that her mother was always pursuing something. Now that long seeking was over; and to the sorrowing girl the absolute stillness, the unbroken repose, seemed a thing most strange and wonderful. So vast was the chasm between what life had been and what death was that there were moments in which she felt as though it were by the side of some stranger, and not beside her mother, that she kept an awful vigil.

On the pillow by the dead woman lay rare and delicate blossoms; flowers that had never budded and bloomed in the White House garden.

Against the grey twilight of the curtained windows was seen the silhouette of a girl's bowed head, of a slender, drooping figure.

"It is I—Alicia," said a tender, trembling voice again, and a light footstep crossed to Hilda's side. "I was ill, dear, I could not come before. Now I am here, you will not send me from you, will you?"

Alicia spoke timidly. The relation in which the two women stood to one another appeared to be reversed. As with most sensitive natures, with Alicia repulse engendered timidity; and now she might have been the girl, and Hilda the matured woman, so wistful was her voice, so pleading her attitude. Hilda raised her head. Her tear-dimmed eyes, looking earnestly and intently through the dusk, were like those of a spirit.

"Why should I send you away?" she said, drawing the other down beside her; "there is no shadow between us now."

"I felt the shadow come—it hurt me cruelly; for I loved you, Hilda, dearly; but I never knew its name."

"I had a secret to keep—or thought I had—a terrible, cruel secret to keep—and I feared you, for I loved you so that it would have been hard to hide it from you. Such an agony of fear came over me at times that I grew weak,

helpless, full of longing for some hand to hold in mine—some voice to say one word of comfort to me. I dared not let myself even think of you then. It was too much love, not too little, that drove me from you—dear."

"Poor child! poor child!"

Alicia's hair, once brown and ruddy as the ripened hazel-nut, was now thickly lined with grey; in her eyes was to be seen the mild and radiant shining that tells of a heart satisfied and at peace, and a life made perfect by perfect love. She had lived and loved; had waited, and won her heart's desire, and the lesson her own happiness had taught her was a tender yearning to comfort those less happy than herself. The touch of her hand seemed to hold the grace of healing. Her voice fell with welcome cadence on the ear of sorrow.

After a while Hilda said: "You have never asked me what my secret was."

"Because I know it already. You were afraid your mother was mad; you were afraid she might be taken from you if the world shared your secret. Ah, heart so strong and tender, how it must have ached!"

"It did—it did!"

"All seemed so dark—so dark and sad—and then the sunshine came, and it was all the sweeter for the darkness that had gone before. Was it not so, child?"

"Yes, yes—so sweet and precious! All the trouble died out; even that ghastly fear had less terror in it, and then—only that very night—he told me he would never part us—never take me from her. One can bear anything—cannot one—when there are two to it!"

As in a flash, the years of her wedded life came up before Alicia, while she answered with a catching of the breath:

"Yes, yes, whatever Heaven may send."

"Even now," said Hilda, "in all the sorrow of this terrible struggle to realize that what was a living, breathing creature so short a while ago is now but *that*, I have the same comfort still. Do you see the flowers upon her pillow? It was Ralph who sent them."

As she spoke, the two women rose from the wide, low window-seat, and, hand in hand, drew nearer and nearer to the bier.

When close beside it, Hilda bent until her lips touched the white petals that were hardly whiter than the marble cheek against which they lay.

"My love," she sighed, "how good you are to me!"

Then she touched the lovely, rippled, lint-white hair that was parted on the icy brow of the dead, and sank on her knees, sobbing out the name that for her must henceforth be a name only:

"Mothie—mothie—and you loved me—after all!"

What a revelation were those two last words!

After all the struggle, and the lonely, loveless life—after all the unrecognised devotion—after all the weary, unsatisfied longing—she had been loved!

Alicia Deane, kneeling by her side, not striving to stem the torrent of her grief, but only to make her feel that the torrent had not to be met alone, was not without a feeling of self-reproach as she looked at the dead white face and folded hands of the woman whom she had steadily disliked and mistrusted.

Had she not, after all, been harsh in her judgment? Had the bitter resentment that swayed Hester's whole life, that had been blind and distorted, unreasoning and unrelenting, been wholly unjust? Was it not wrong rather in the manner of it than in the fact of its existence? Might not she—Alicia, have been less ready to condemn that which she could not understand—have made more persevering efforts to win, and, maybe, to soften?

As these thoughts grew in her, she prayed for God's mercy on the passionate sad soul that had passed away from earth for ever, and then she cast her arm about the shaken form beside her, drew the poor aching head upon her breast, and vowed to her own heart and to God, that for Hilda a mother's care and love should never more be lacking.

CHAPTER XXXV.

JAKE'S WATCH AND CHAIN.

HESTER DEVENANT slept quietly enough now by the side of him she had in life so loved, and in death so passionately yet faultily mourned.

The White House was closed, and the grim goblin on the stairs, that the boy Ralph had touched tenderly night by night as he passed it by, had only its fellows to gibe and grin at; and even that, in the weird, uncanny gloom born of shuttered windows and closed doors.

To the outer world it seemed as though a strange drama was played out, the actors gone, the lights turned down, the stage deserted. Only those behind the scenes knew that the play was but just begun, the scene only shrifted, the most delicate and intricate part of the plot still to be carried out.

Becklington did not hear with much surprise that Hester Devenant had died "unlike most," since she had lived in the same fashion.

"It wur folly to look for her to do owt same as other folk," said Jake, wisely shaking his head over a life-time's persistent eccentricity; "ony one of us can mak' a nat'ral endin' i' our beds wi' doctor and parson, each after his kind, and weepin' relatives set round; but it's not to be looked for in a woman like Gabriel's widow as she should dee loike t' ruck on us."

"It was like that!" said Dr. Turtle, the individual to whom these animadversions were addressed, and he flipped his fingers smartly in the air; "Like that!"

"God save us!" ejaculated Jake, a prey to the same emotion as that which would have caused a Catholic to cross himself in hot haste. Then he leant his arms on the boot he was mending, and looked gravely and intently at the doctor over his horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Weel, weel," he said, "shoo's at rest, doctor, and that's more than ony man could say of her while she lived, or," he added, not without a twinkle in his little, bright eyes, "of them as lived a-nigh her. I tell you what it is: her worritin'

ways had a sight more to say to Gabriel's sorry ending than had the bank robbery; and as to Miss Hilda—God bless her sweet face!—it's mony a time I've thought things wur sadder wi' her than should be for one so young."

"Please Heaven the sadness will die out of it now, Jake."

"Ay, ay," nodded the cobbler, preparing to resume his work; "when she's Maister Ralph's wedded wife she'll happen learn to smile a bit oftener—the fault wunna be hisen if she doan't; but he's had a sight o' sorrer hissen has Maister Ralph, and needs cheerin' as much as she do, for his heart wur fair broke by t' squoire's death, and he carries a mony more years on his yed than belongs theer by reet—that do he! Ay, doctor, but it's a rum go, too, as maks Hester Devenant's choilt mistress o' the Dale. Whoy, I moind when she used to go oop theer to see Miss Alice and t' ould squoire, and tak' her dish o' tea i' the housekeeper's room, and be larned to play the harpsichord by that same dear lady, and it wur thout a foine thing for her to be so privileged above her fellows—that it wur. Yet I reckon the gentry 'ull tak to her like a duck to wayter, as t' sayin' goes—and well may they, or ony sich, fer she's a fair flower to be set i' ony mon's bress, be he who he may. She got a tidy scare, though, I reckon, doctor, when the mother turned the corner so mighty sharp, wi' never a good-bye, nor a squeeze o' t' hond, nor nowt as the lass moight howd on to afterwards. The maid as wur t' fust to reach her said it would ha' gone hard wi' onyone to say which face wur whitest—the dead mother or the living choilt—and the last wailin' fit to brast the heart in a chap's body to hear her."

"Men in my profession," said the doctor, blowing his nose violently, "see strange sights and sad ones; they need strong nerves—nerves of iron; the courage of a good soldier; and, thank God, Miss Hilda has good friends to stand by her in the day of tribulation. She is well cared for, Jake, by our good vicar and his wife."

"Which on us, as comes in ony trouble, isna—if you come to that?" said Jake. "Wi' the loike o' you to fettle broken legs, and the loike o' him and her to bind up the broken-hearted and comfort them as is heavy-laden, Becklington's well done by, i' the matter o' mendin'—both temp'ral and spiritoo'al, say I."

"While in the matter of boot-mending, it might do worse than little Jake the cobbler—eh, man?" said Dr. Turtle, taking an airy pinch, and pleased with his own readiness.

"Maybe, doctor, maybe; but my trade isna what it wur. There's new fangled notions about—there's a frowardness in heels and toes as no modest female should connive at, and fal-lals o' that mak' ketches the female fancy, so it comes about that a sight o' folk go to York, or some such scarlet Babylon, to buy their Sunday best; but for honest work-a-day boots they still come to little Jake, so happen it's as broad as it's long."

"Still, you are a prosperous man, Jake, or you couldn't treat yourself to such fal-lals as the new silver watch-chain which I see glistening under the fob of your apron."

Ay, but yo've sharp eyes, doctor,—sharp eyes of your own," said Jake, slipping his head out of the leather loop that held up the bib of his apron, and drawing from his pocket a handsome silver watch; "T' chain's nowt but t' tail-end o' the matter. Look ye there!" and he held up the watch in the sunlight.

"Bless us all!" said Dr. Turtle; "why, Jake, you're quite a dandy!"

"It looks loike it, do'ant it?" replied Jake with a grin. "But it's others as has druv me to 't. I hanna took to 't nat'ral. I'll tell yo how this here glorification come about. 'Twas this way. Here I set—last Friday it wur a week—thinkin' of nothin' at all bo' my wark, an' tryin' to puzzle out an awk'ard turn o' a toon we're larnin' at t' chapel. Weel, all in a minute there cooms a sailor-chap as brings hissen to anchor just wheer yo're a standin' now. 'Well,' says he, 'and how do yo' find yoursen, my man?' 'Yo're mighty pleasant,' says I, lookin' up at 'im; 'I find mysen partic'lar comfortable,' says I. 'I'm glad of that,' says he, and then he whistled a bit, same as your seafarin' chap allers does when he has a mind to foot-it merry i' the hornpipe line. 'Is yo're name Jake?' says he. 'It is,' says I; 'have yo' owt to say agen it?' 'Not I,' says he; 'it's like old music to me;' and wi' that he smoilt all over his face till he looked like t' rising sun atop o' Mrs. Callender's clock. 'Why, Jake,' says he, 'han' yo' clean forgot me?' and at that word, and t' look as come along wi' 't, down went last and boot

clatterin' atop o' one another, and 'I'm domed,' shouts I, 'if it bean't little 'patch'!'"

"Not the widow's son?" said Dr. Turtle, all amazement. "It was never the poor widow's son, Jake?"

"It were no' but he; and in he coom, and down he set: and such a tale he had to tell! Why, 'twur for all t' world like a story-book."

"Jake, I am right glad your kindness to that poor woman and her little ones has had its reward, even 'after many days.'"

Jake knew that the good old doctor spoke thus, not of that gorgeous gift the silver watch and chain, but of the grateful memory of which it was the sign and symbol.

"Aye, aye," he says, wagging his grizzled head; "I wur reetly glad i' my heart as they hadna forgot t' little cobbler."

"But what was the story 'patch' had to tell?" continued Dr. Turtle.

"Weel—she'd cheered up had that po'r widow-woman—tuk to less whimpering ways, I reckon, and tidied hersen up some. Ony way, i' the end, she wed wi' an honest mon as feythered the dead mon's childer same as if they wur his own. He did well by 'em, I warrant yo', and 'patch' wur giv' a power o' schoolin', but he'd a rovin' nature in 'im, so he set his moind on goin' to sea; and what does that honest chap do but 'prentice 'im i' the marchant sarvice. Weel, sir, when 'patch' come whoam from his third long voyage, it wur to find hissen an 'heritor."

"A what?" quoth the doctor, puzzled, and stimulating his brain with a pinch.

"An 'heritor—that is to say, an heir," explained Jake; "the chap as robbed Stirling's bank—be who he moight and where he moight—had taken a fit o' soft-heartedness, that had he."

Dr. Turtle drew suddenly nearer to the speaker. It almost seemed as though his venerable cheek lost a shade of its naturally healthy colour. The doctor was as rosy as a stale apple that time had shrivelled, yet not robbed of its ruddy glory. The fervid zeal of loyalty that had been wont to burn so brightly in his breast had still the same steady glow. "The Queen—God bless her!" was still the

toast given to his guests on all festive occasions of hospitality. Time, in truth, seemed to have ripened rather than aged Dr. Turtle. His form was as slender and upright, his manner as *débonnaire*, as ever.

But now, as Jake's last words fell upon his ear, he seemed all at once to shrink together, to gather himself up closely, to lose his wonted air of happy interest in the history of widow Bunnycastle and her family.

"May I step into that cosy parlour of yours," he said, "and warm my fingers at the blaze? They are a bit benumbed, for the first autumn winds strike chill, and my blood is old, Jake, old, and lacks the fire it once had."

Not a little surprised at such an unlooked-for claim upon his hospitality, laying the honour done him somewhat at the door of the new watch and chain; and fervently hoping that a neighbour or two might see his guest ushered through the shop, Jake hastened to open the half-door with its jingling bell, jingling it more than was needful in order to attract the notice of any chance passer-by. Dr. Turtle, stepping gingerly among boots and shoes, tools, and fragments of leather, made his way to the small, exquisitely neat room that looked into a tiny courtyard all ablaze with scarlet-runners and a monster sun-flower or two.

Jake whisked off his apron, and hung it on a peg behind the door. It was all very well to sit at his work and in his working attire when folks stopped for a chat outside, but when quality saw fit to make themselves at home in the parlour, greater pomp and ceremony were called for.

"Ah . . . " said the doctor contentedly, "this is a vast improvement."

He drew a wooden chair—whose legs squeaked horribly on the flagged floor in the process—close beside the fire, and set to warming his hands.

"And how goes on the new partner—eh?" he said presently.

"Which it's Abel you're drivin' at, doctor? Weel, weel, he does his best, and which on us con do more? He's a long, lanky chap, as God A'mighty never made for to sit compact and comfortable on a cobbler's bench; but he tucks his legs away as best he can, and mak's t' best on hissen, and when I'm gone he'll be ready to step into my shoes, as the

sayin' goes, which for him means mendin' other people's. He bean't over broight i' t' yed, bean't Abel, but he's main good to his blind old mother, so I dinna grudge givin' him a lift—not I. It bean't every mon as is built special for his trade," continued Jake with a glance of complacency at his own spindles; "but it's a mighty foine thing, doctor, when t' legs is fitted for t' burden as well as t' back—as the sayin' goes."

The sudden agitation that had shaken Dr. Turtle seemed to have passed.

He cleared his throat, and reverted to the subject of the wonderful story told by the donor of the silver watch, for such he had conjectured "patch" to be.

"So the boy 'patch' found himself an inheritor, did he?"

"Aye, and to some tune," said Jake, taking up his dropped parable with avidity, and sitting on the extreme edge of his chair, as a tribute to the quality of his guest; "for, as I wur saying when yo' took the chills, the chap as robbed Stirling's bank sent back every penny of the widow's mite—which I use as a figger, sir—meanin' all as wur stole from Mistress Bunnycastle, 'even to the uttermost farthin',' as the book hath it——"

"How was it sent?" put in the doctor, speaking as though he were a little short of breath.

"Secretly—done up to look like nothin' in pertickler," answered Jake, leaning across a small deal table that stood between host and guest, and opening his eyes alarmingly wide; "it wur done that crafty-like as nothin' wur never known like it, and wheer it came from God knows—and none else, I reckon!"

"How did the—person who sent it, know where Mrs. Bunnycastle was to be found?" said the doctor, rubbing one hand thoughtfully over the other, and looking at the fire.

"That's the puzzlement of it, doctor!" cried Jake, going near to upset the table in his excitement; "but come it did, by post, too, from Lunnun; but, deary me, Lunnun's a big place to look fer a sma' thing in, wi' ony hopes o' findin' it. But there's more o' this story to come yet, sir—not about the 'heritance as 'patch' 'herited, but about a strange kind o' chance as befell him in that there voyage I spoke of. Happen, however, I'd best finish about the 'heritance first.

Well, sir, the man as had married the widow and feythered her childer, he just took that money, and parted it out, to each choilt a part. He'd more than enoo' hissen, said he, for him and t' missus, and t' money wur earnt by him as wur dead and gone, so that wur t' best way to deal by't. Then him, and her, and 't lads got agate spakin' o' that dratted old miller, wi' a heart as hard as 'is own millstones, and——"

"Of all you did, my generous friend, to help the widow and the fatherless?" put in the doctor.

"Weel, happen they did call me to moind—in truth I reckon they must ha' said summat, for 'patch,' he cried out: 'Blest if I don't buy a silver watch as big as a turmit and take it along to Jake the cobbler!' at which, says the man as feythered him: 'Yo' conna do a better thing.' So yo' see, doctor, part o' the 'heritance come to me, as you may say, and sin the day 'patch' brought it, and the town knew I'd got it, there's not a boy i' Becklington but what's come grinnin' to my window to axe me the time o' day, just to get a glint o' Jake's gran' watch."

"Naturally—of course they have," said Dr. Turtle; "but come, tell me, what other marvels have you to relate? Time flies, and I must fly with it."

"I've this to relate," said Jake, revelling in his position as the teller of strange news, and mouthing his words slowly to prolong the pleasure of hearing himself speak; "I've this to tell: the last voyage but one as ever 'patch' took who should be aboard the vessel as he served in—but——Take a guess at it now, doctor?"

"Master Ralph," said the doctor, and leaned back in his chair, with his hands gripping each other close.

"None other," said Jake—"him and the poor gentleman as were drownded dead i' the very next voyage ever they went on. Weel, Maister Ralph, when he found from the captain as a lad aboard had lived i' Becklington, and been i' Becklington, toime o' the bank robbery, he had him into his cabin, and 'patch' made free to tell him all about the other young uns at home, and Maister Ralph—God bless him!—were as gentle as gentle, and seemed to love to hear it all. He shook hands wi' 'patch,' and my lad,' says he, 'I'm right glad that all has gone so well wi' you and yours, and there's yet another as

'ull be glad at heart too,' says he, 'for I'll write to my dear father as soon as I set my foot on land, and tell him all the story.' . . . Why, Lord ha' mercy! do yo' be cold still, doctor?" said Jake, interrupting his narrative suddenly, and staring hard at his guest: "I'm varry feared yo've took a proper chill; yo're as white as milk, an' a' shakin' loike. Yo'd best gang whoam, sir, and tak' a hot posset afore yo' go to bed."

"Yes," said the doctor, "your advice is good—you ought to belong to our profession; you'd be an ornament to it, Jake—an ornament to it. Good-day to you—good-day—good-day!"

Left alone, Jake scratched his head, staring blankly at the old matchlock above the mantel.

"If I didn't know as he was a sober-minded gentleman, I should be fancying he'd stay'd too long at Widow Green's on his way here. My sakes! I hope he ain't sickenin' for a fever of the brain—Becklington could ill spare Dr. Turtle. Happen he were a bit shook over the sad end as Mistress Hester made; he's as tender-hearted as a chicken, is the doctor, though he do talk so mighty big about nerves and such like."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A HAPPY EXILE.

Amid the desolation of her own home another home had opened to Hilda. Without much asking of "with your leave, or by your leave," Cuthbert Deane and his gentle wife had taken her to the Vicarage, and told her that henceforth, until a nearer, dearer claim should wind about her heart and life, there her place should be.

The niche fitted her so well, and she it, that in a marvellously short time it seemed as though she had been an inmate of that quiet happy home for years instead of for days only.

Her mind dwelt wonderingly upon the surpassing kindness that the world holds for those who mourn, and who are surrounded by true and loving hearts. If she were Dr.

Turtle's own child could he be more tender to her, more watchful over her, more thoughtful in his ministrations to her bodily needs? If Davie were her own brother could he be more careful over her, more frankly, beautifully kind? Then there were Mr. and Mrs. Geddes, who came to see her one evening just as the dusk was closing in, and who sat, one on either side, speaking softly, and evidently regarding Master Ralph's betrothed as a thing unspeakably precious and sacred. Even Lady Boscawen's high nose and magnificent manner had no terrors for Hilda, since she saw a tear trickle down the former, and the latter was toned down to an unwonted gentleness.

"So you are going to marry Ralph, one of these days," said her ladyship, not without a little huskiness of voice; "and going to live abroad? Well, my dear, I dare say it is better so, for a time; but I know I should have grown very fond of you, and I'm sorry to lose you. So is Denby, I assure you. It is only his way to put on a bouncing sort of manner when his feelings are touched. I really must ask you to look upon him with my eyes, which are used to him, my dear, and can read him—through and through."

At which Denby looked very uncomfortable, and more "bouncing" than ever; for he had been beating his brain as to what to say to this pale-cheeked maiden, and had had his toil for nothing, so full was he of good intentions, and so clumsy in the carrying of them out.

"She looks as if she had seen a ghost, and couldn't get it out of her mind," he said, as he and his wife drove home together.

"It was your brusque manner frightened her," said Lady Boscawen, leaning back in the carriage majestically, but longing to get home that she might have a "good cry."

It had been a sad blow to her to learn that Ralph Stirling was going to travel in foreign lands once more, instead of settling down at The Dale with his bride. She fancied such conduct betrayed a want of confidence in herself, and in her will to float Hilda serenely on the waters of county society. She was hurt with Ralph, but when she tried to reason with him he seemed to slip out of her hold, even when most grateful for her interest in him and in Hilda, setting her remonstrances aside with a tender determination.

After the storm, the calm.

So it was with Hilda Devenant.

The hush, the rest of Alicia's companionship, were beyond measure solacing to her poor tired heart.

Love, too, taught her courage. He who loved her so well—had he not cruelly suffered? Was he not, even now, wading through deepest waters of Mara?

What, then, was her sacred office? To comfort, to sustain him in the bitter struggle for the right, which now lay before him.

She taught her pale lips to smile on him; for him her eyes held ever a tender light of greeting. To him her exquisite and perfect sympathy was as wine to a weary traveller.

Hilda learned with unspeakable thankfulness that the flowers he had laid on the pillow beside her dead mother were messengers of peace and pardon; that he bore no bitter hatred, cherished no vindictive resentment, towards the tortured, misguided woman who had wrought such evil for him and his, and striven so hard to make his life barren and broken.

Even where he could not justify, he could forgive: where he must perforce condemn, he could pity.

"We shall have an anxious time of it together, dear," he said one gloaming time when the two were alone together in the pretty Vicarage drawing-room; "a wearing and anxious time of it."

"Better together than separate," she answered, smiling.

The dark rings of sorrow and weeping still encircled her eyes. She looked but a slender creature in her black sweeping robes. Her face had grown white and small: the full rounded contour of the cheek had somewhat fallen, and the mouth, at rest, was sad.

But what a brave, true soul looked out at him from her eyes—what tenderness chased the sadness from her lips, as they smiled upon him, or met his own in a trembling kiss! How should he have borne his sorrows without her? What would life be to him were he bereft of her?

"People will not wonder much at our taking to a wandering life," he said; "I have always been a reckless kind of fellow, as Lady Boscawen said to me to-day, with the tears

in her kind eyes; and you are willing to follow my altered fortunes, sweetheart—are not you?"

"Willing?" she said. "Oh, Ralph! I have lived alone with such dread fears—I have companied with my own weary, aching heart through such dark hours of pain, that it seems like heaven, my darling, to know that never again—never as long as God shall give us life together—shall I know what it is to be alone!"

And so, with weeping that was laughter, and laughter that was weeping, she cast herself into the arms that held her with a fond and passionate grip—then fell to abject weeping amidst a perfect storm of little catching sobs, over her darling's cruel fate.

"Oh, my love, my love!" she cried, "my exile, driven from home and country—my poor boy, sent adrift with only me to comfort him!"

"Banished?" he said; "exiled? What folly are you talking, sweetheart? How can a man be banished when he takes his world along with him?"

Then they grew calmer, talked of all Ralph's plans and difficulties; of how old Anthony was toiling to carry out his master's wishes; of poor Nurse Prettyman, entreating with tears to be allowed "go follow" the two into a new world and a new life; of a great hospital that one day should arise amid the growing population of Becklington, as a refuge for the sick and suffering—a hospital so amply endowed that no perfection in it should be lacking; of a new church and schools; of all the mighty works of charity, that should be in reality (though the world should know it not) but efforts at restitution and expiation.

"Then—in time—I shall sell the Dale," said Ralph, and a shadow crossed his face.

Had he not built castles in that old home of his; and now, were they not all tumbling about his ears?

But Hilda put her arms about his neck, and kissed away the sadness from his lips.

"You know I have something of my own, Ralph," she said; "I have all the money that Uncle Lemaire left me long ago—we can add mine to yours, and then we sha'n't be quite poor," she added with an adorable air of triumph and tenderness.

"Poor!" cried Ralph, radiant in look and smile, "how can we be anything but rich as long as we have each other? Answer me that, my darling?"

Which was, of course, the soundest logic, and not to be confuted by all the learning of the schools.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AT THE SAFE RETREAT.

It was an evening in early spring.

The hawthorn-tree that overshadowed the porch of The Safe Retreat was one great posy of tiny white buds amid leaves of that exquisitely delicate green that is never seen save when the world's garment of verdure is but newly donned.

In the tea-gardens behind the hostelrie the crocuses, those cup-bearers of the spring, stood all a-row, fair chalices of gold, of white, and soft faint purple.

Widow Green was proud of her flower-garden, and with reason, too, and had been heard to call the hawthorn-tree, in front, the "luck of the house."

Now, though it was thick with buds, and though the swallows had come home from their winter wanderings and had been fluttering about the market-place all day, the evenings were still chill enough to make the cosy, crimson-curtained parlour of the inn a welcome haven.

Here were gathered a group of well-known faces, for it was Saturday night, and a pipe and a glass among friends were joys not to be despised by men who knew how to appreciate the good things of this life.

A pleasant subject, too, was under discussion, for they spoke of a wedding that had set St. Mary's bells ringing more than a year ago, smiling as they chatted and nodded over the reminiscence of it.

"'Twere a simple kind o' a weddin' in the matter o' pomp and circumstance," said Farmer Dale, "but I never see'd two folk look more contenteder to be taking each other for

better for waur than Maister Ralph and the girl Hilda. There wur such a light o' glad content shinin' i' her bonnie eyes as might ha' made sunshine i' a dark place; and as for him—Lord ha' mercy! how like the feyther he did bo' look, as he come up afore t' vicar and smoilt a bit of a smoile as much as to say: 'It's a proud mon I am this day, and a happy—and I'm reet glad for a' men to see the pride and the gladness o' my heart. I'm coom here for to take her for better and for waur, and I don't care a dom for the waur as long as I hold her little hond i' moine.'"

"But Maister Ralph didna say all yon?" put in Jake, who was apt to be literal at times, or, at all events, obtuse, in regard to other men's "figgers."

"No," replied the farmer, "bo' he looked it a'—and more beside—for the shadder o' a moighty sorrer was over him, same as has bin' over him ever sin' he came whoam to find the feyther dead and gone. It took his youth out o' him, did that sorrer, Jake—and youth's a jewel that, onct lost, none of us con foind no more, search how we may. He's lived ten years i' one as the saying goes, has Maister Ralph; but I reckon he's a good comfort i' the true heart as beats beside his own; and there's time to look to too, which is a good doctor for a wounded heart."

"I never see'd a prattier splicin' to my moind then Maister Ralph's," said Jeremy. "I'd reared each blossom i' Miss Hilda's boquay from a buddin' bud, and knew 'em same as if they'd bin my own childer—eh! bo' they wur a bonnie lot; and 'Jeremy,' says she, 'my husband says I have to thank *you* for these!' Didn't she grow rosy neither over the word as wur bo' strange to her sweet lips, but her eyes wur laughin' as she looked at 'im, and I reckon he gev' her a squeedge wi' 's arm for sayin' it out so pat and pratty.

"To hearken t' old Anthony quaverin' out 'Amen,' like as if he'd bin a parish clerk all 's days; and to see 'im givin' away the bride as purlite and nat'ral as if he wur her lawful grandfather, that's what tuk my fancy," said Jake; "and it seems bo' yesterday as it a' happened, though it's more nor a year agone; and happen there's a babby born to Maister Ralph by this."

"Weel, if so be as that's so, we don't be like to ha' much

o' seein' on it," said Jeremy; "for there's no word o' the young couple comin' whoam; and some folks say as the Dale is like to be sold—me wi' 't, I reckon."

"Aye," put in Farmer Dale, "I've heerd some kind of a rumour as things moight be apt to turn out that way, and I tell yo' what it is—there's wanderin' blood somewheres among the Stirlings. Happen, ever so long back, one on 'em married wi' a gipsy, and that gipsy's natur' is allers risin' oop in 'em, same as bubbles i' wine, and instigatin' of 'em to be up and stirrin'. Then his father bred 'im up i' wanderin' ways, and had 'im taught to speak many strange tongues, so as he'd never need be baain' like a lost lamb i' strange pastures, go *wheer* he may."

"There's none here has better cause to remember Maister Ralph's weddin'-day, than thee, farmer," said Jeremy; "luck fell into thy lap, unbeknownt, as one may say, while t' bells o' the old church wur clatterin' fit to bring t' tower down."

"Aye, aye," said the farmer; "'twere an unlooked-for Christmas-gift I got that toime; and happen I stared at our vicar an' old Anthony more than wur seemly, when they gin' me t' roll o' papers and tould me as I'd paid my last uarter's rent for Dale Farm."

"'Twere t' ould Squire Stirling's wish for thee to have it. He'd ha' done t' deed himsen if he'd ha' lived long enoo."

"So they said—so they said," answered the burly farmer, passing his hand thoughtfully over his head, stroking his hair into his eyes, and then pushing it back from his brow; "so they said."

"Yon wur a proud day for thy missus," said Jeremy.

"Ay—she wur reet fain, wur Nancy; she laughed and she fair blethered, both in a breath, and went nigh to strangle our Jim, so close she clip't him about t' neck. Mothers aye think more o' their childer's good than their own; and Nance wur every bit as pleased to think as Jim and his heirs after him 'ud own t' ould place, after she and I be gone, as that we wur land owners i' place o' land renters, that wur she!"

"It's the way wi' womenfolk," said Jake, speaking with an air as of vast experience of the sex, at which Jeremy put his tongue stealthily into the cheek next the farmer.

"'Twur a foine thing o' t' ould squoire to think o' makin' thee out-and-out owner o' t' land thee'd tilled so weel," said Amos Callender; "an' a pratty action o' Maister Ralph to gie it over to thee on 's weddin' day. There's more nor gipsy-blood i' the Stirlings, mates; there's a generous and lovin' sperrit. Aye, moy sakes! bo' what a thought it is, to call to moind Squoire Geoffrey, weak and wan, houldin' on to t' winder-cheek o' t' bank winder, and axing us fer to possess our souls i' patience, and trust him to do the best fer everyone on us! I moind it same as if 't wur this very minute as now is. And I've oftentimes said to my old Bess as 'tis a marvel o' dealin' as that riddle wur never read. Somewheers on God's earth the rascally chap as did the sin wanders wi' a heavy moind. This must be so, or Widow Bunnycastle would ne'er have had her savin's sent all unbeknownst, and Jake theer 'ud never have had such a gaudy chain across his boosum."

To this Jeremy made reply in kind, bringing forward his own experiences of that dreadful day long years ago, and telling how Master Ralph (then something about as high as the table) broke into bitter crying, and had to be carried off sobbing by Nurse Prettyman, when he heard tell of the people who were "sad and sorry."

Meanwhile the farmer and Jake kept silence, and sat looking, not at each other, but at the fire.

Soon after this, Amos Callender took his leave of the rest, saying that Bess and "the lass Em'ly" were gone out to a tea-drinking and he had promised to fetch them home, at which Jeremy also took his leave, moralising over the immensity of watchful care called for in the matter of young seedlings "planted out i' frames," when, for all the sun might shine in the day bright enough to dazzle you, nipping frosts were given to tweek the tender leaves and turn them black.

So out across the stones whereon the shadow of the budding hawthorn wavered in the breath of the keen clear wind, went the two; and Jake and the farmer were left to keep each other company.

Silence reigned for a while.

Then the two men (being one on either side the cheery hearth) looked hard, each at the other.

"Theer's strange thoughts," said Jake, ruffling his hair all over his head till it looked like a badly made hay-cock, "theer's fearsome thoughts as comes i' a mon's yed now an' agen wi'out axing leave, and settles theer like flies on carrion; theer's thoughts as moight weel be ashamed to show their brazen faces; thoughts as coom and coom, no matter how yo' drive 'em off, same as they say a crowd o' boggarts chase a chap as tries to cross t' dyke-land after midnight on Hallow E'en——"

Jake shook his head as he spoke; and by the look of trouble on his face, a boggart might have been peeping at him round the corner of the high-backed bench on which he sat. Farmer Dale, who had listened in grave silence, rubbing his hands slowly together and nodding his head as though to check off each item of his companion's discourse, now rose to his feet, taking his stand with head gently bowed and hands clasped before him, much as he was wont to do in church.

"Theer's thoughts as coom," he said, speaking both solemnly and sadly, "and wunna be cast out; or, if they be cast out, it's but to coom agen; bo' such-like thoughts shouldna be spoke, nor yet read by ony save by Him who reads the heart same as an open book. It's ill work raking oop the ashes o' a dead mon to see if yo' can raise a stink—bo' to yo' neighbour Jake—a good mon and true, and one whose heart can harbour no bad feelin', I'll say this much—happen as Squoire Geoffrey carried a heavier burden on his heart than me nor ony mon i' Becklington had a moind to think i' those dark days that's past and gone. If this be so, I've but one word to say, and this is it—God rest the soul that carried such a load!"

And Jake, who had risen, as men rise when sacred words are uttered in their hearing, said, "Amen to that."

Then the two passed out into the night across the shadow of the thorn-tree, and spoke no more of that strange riddle that had never been read.

But as time went on, and strange gifts, of a magnificent charity, were dealt out to Becklington by the hand of the man who came back no more to claim his own, suspicions, like little snakes through grass, crept here and

there with stealthy rustlings; yet never came out into the open, nor reared themselves, hissing, in the light of day.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FAREWELL.

One more glimpse at Becklington, and it is a parting one.

The spring sunshine is glinting everywhere; shimmering down upon the stones of the old market-place; catching the vane on the town-hall, twinkling in the little pewter can that Amos Callender's lass Emily is dangling to please the baby in her lap, as she sits at the door of the house-place, watching for her father coming home to dinner.

Emily is on a visit to the old folks, and has brought her youngest born to make the grandmother's heart young again and set her off in endless recollections of Emily's own baby-days, and baby feats.

There she is, the cheery soul! peeping round the door, and clapping her hands to make the baby laugh. And there comes Amos, swinging along as if all Becklington belonged to him; while Jake, sitting at his work over the way, waves his hand with as much dignity as if he were bestowing a benediction, and the lanky Abel, standing near in momentary idleness, grins a greeting to the tanner as he passes on towards home.

The squeezed-up building in the corner of the market-place, that was once Stirling's Bank, has just been what is technically termed "done up." The windows that we once saw closely shuttered, and staring blankly with sightless eyes at the tumult of humanity that surged below, are now bright with plate-glass panes, bearing imposing announcements as to shipping, in gilt letters that shimmer in the sun.

The ivy is gone from the wide, low chimney, whence issued that mist of pale blue smoke, veiling the stars. All things are brisk and new about the renovated building, and the lurking door leading into Church Lane is bricked up long ago.

Amos and Bess are laughing to see Emily holding the baby up on weakling legs, making believe that it can walk across the stones to meet grandad.

Jake is whistling the last new chapel tune, as he goes on briskly with his work.

A lark's song bubbles over head, a fountain of melody in the blue, cloudless sky. Jake's pigeons are preening themselves and cooing on the red-tiled roof.

All things speak of peace and happiness: of a sorrow that is past: of a wound that is healed.

The shadow of the cross in the centre of the market-place lies upon the stones, but the cross itself stands in the sunshine.

So—though the memory of the sin that was sinned, and the evil that was wrought, lingers in many a heart—the sin and the wrong themselves have lost the old bitterness and ceased to be a sore.

Let us pass on to the meadows, and so meet Cuthbert Deane and his wife Alicia, who are coming down that way from the church.

We do but follow in the wake of Davie, as he hurries eagerly along in the same direction, taking off his hat and waving it, as he catches sight of the two figures side by side emerging from the shadow cast by the belt of beech-trees that edge the churchyard.

Soon the three stand in a group, and Alicia is smiling her sympathy with Davie's haste and eagerness. Things have gone well with Davie since we saw him last. Life for him is full of fair new hopes. It is as full of promise as the hawthorn tree before The Safe Retreat of buds. Has he then forgotten that first love of his, sweet Hilda of the violet eyes and gentle voice? Not he!

The man or woman who has once been loved is never quite the same as any other in the life that has cherished them. An echo of the old music must ever linger about the name that has once been graven there. Hence, to Davie, Hilda was ever a sacred and tender memory, and he held the knowledge of her happiness as something infinitely precious. He knew that when the desire of the heart had become a living reality, no sorrow, for her, could ever be beyond reach of comfort, so long as her husband was by her side. And,

knowing this to be so, he thanked God that through troubled waters and an angry sea she had reached at last the haven where she would be. For himself, a great-niece of old Anthony's had come to make her home with that worthy man and his good wife, and Davie's zeal in visiting the old couple, and reading to Anthony, whose sight was failing, was in very truth a touching sight.

The oftener he went, the more he was convinced that life was full of beautiful things and sweet surprises, of which neither the least beautiful, nor the least wonderful, was the growing conviction that there lived a woman, young and fair, who could love David Robin, in spite of there being "summat wrong wi him"; that a woman's eyes could look beyond the awkward gait and heavy shoulders, and read a welcome story in the eyes, that, if graver and more wistful than those of other men, were also more tender.

But we are wandering from the little group of three gathered together in the spring sunshine, amid the daisies and buttercups that are trying their best to hide the grass.

The vicar's wife has taken a letter from Davie's hand, opened it, and is tantalizing the other two by keeping its contents to herself, while first smiling, and then—not quite—but almost—crying over it.

"How are things going with them?" says the vicar. "Is Ralph pleased to hear that the site for the hospital is secured at last?"

"He is very much pleased about—everything," says Alicia, with a roguish triumph in the eyes that look at her husband over the edge of Ralph's letter; "he likes his Australian home more and more every day, and he is getting on with his farming marvellously well. Mrs. Prettyman, too, is becoming convinced that the New World is better than the Old, and has expressed a wish to lay her bones there."

"And Hilda—" says Davie. "What news of her?"

"The best," says Alicia, and this time there can be no doubt as to tears that glitter in her eyes; "there is a baby—a little baby girl, and they have called it——'Hester.'"

FINIS.

Stirling, June 1893.

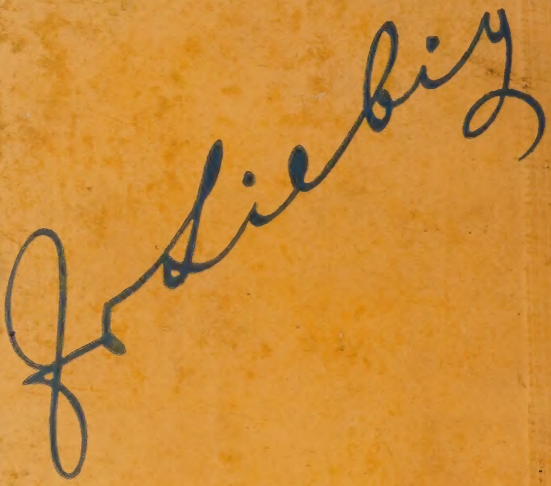
PRINTED BY
HAZELL, WATSON, AND VINEY, LD..
LONDON AND AYLESBURY.

USE

LIEBIG COMPANY'S

EXTRACT OF MEAT

For Flavouring, Strengthening and Improving Soups, Sauces, Gravies and Made Dishes.



*** Ask for the COMPANY'S Extract, and see that it bears JUSTUS VON LIEBIG'S SIGNATURE in **BLUE** ink across the label.